

RELIGIOUS ATHEISM IN CONTEMPORARY WESTERN THOUGHT:  
A CHRISTIAN PROBLEM AND A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

by

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# ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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The thesis is divided into two parts, the first presenting the material and undertaking general interpretation, and the second engaging in more specific interpretation, analysis and development of themes. Both of these parts are in turn divided into two sections, and the thesis as a whole is begun with an introduction and ended with a brief conclusion. The Introduction describes the preliminary difficulties of the subject and sets the tone in which the thesis will be developed. The conclusion represents a summary of the subject based upon the development within the body of the thesis and includes a personal evaluation of the present contribution and significance of Christian atheism.

The first part of the thesis constituting a little over half of its length, looks at atheism in Christianity in the first section and in Buddhism in the second section. The Christian section begins with a long but crucial chapter on <sup>the</sup> general atheistic position of each of the ten persons whom we are considering to be Christian atheists. This is followed by three chapters in which sub-topics which emerge naturally as the major concerns of the Christian atheists, are surveyed. The final chapter of this section is designed to categorise the thought of each of the Christian atheists and their relationships to each other. With the exception of this latter chapter, we have attempted to draw all of the material for this section from the writings of the Christian atheists themselves.

The second section of Part I attempts to do for Buddhism what the first section does for Christian atheism. It begins with a brief introductory chapter and proceeds with a chapter on general Theravada Buddhism based primarily on the Suttas, and a chapter on the more specific Theravada theories based primarily on the Abhidharma. Finally, there is a chapter on Mahayana teaching developed largely from Madhyamikan teaching and a chapter summarising both the Theravada and Mahayana systems in terms which are especially meaningful when undertaking a study of modern Christian atheism. Materials cited in this section are from Buddhism or from the works of students of Buddhism.

The second part of the thesis begins with a section in which the Christian atheists are individually considered, especially in light of Buddhist thought. Here they are treated singly but in the course of five chapters organised so as to keep those most like each other together. Effort is made to outline all the major similarities and dissimilarities with Buddhism and some of the minor ones, as they appear to the author of this thesis. This kind of activity appears not to have been undertaken elsewhere and consequently citations are primarily to works used in the first part of the thesis.

(continued)

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The second section of Part II--the final section of the thesis-- sketches the overall structure of Christian atheism with reference to Buddhist structure where applicable. This section draws from contemporary reactions to all kinds of atheism or developments relevant to it, and thus intends to set the matter of Christian atheism within the context of modern theology and theological discussion. It does this by considering in turn the primary differences between the Christian atheists and Christian orthodoxy, the characteristic methodology or modes of thought which Christian atheists tend to display, the general outlines in which the "sacred" can be identified within their thought, and their relationship to a changing orthodoxy taking Post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism as an example.

The thesis as a whole attempts to describe a plane on which it is meaningful to speak of Christian atheism and to seek an atheistic form of religiousness which is both characteristically Christian and cognisant of the development of atheism within Buddhism. It assumes that future development in the West of this form of religiousness will be most fruitful if it is able to understand its own Christian roots and the profound possibilities of atheism as exemplified by Buddhism.

This thesis is the result of my own  
research and was entirely written by  
myself during my period of residency  
as a Doctoral candidate.

Karen M. Gray  
10 November, 1974

## SUMMARY

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## CONTENTS

Preface	V
INTRODUCTION	1
The Problem of "God"	1
Religion and Christianity	8
Matters of Perspective	11
PART I: GENERAL SURVEY	
A. Christian Atheism	
CHAPTER 1: God	15
1. Simone Weil	16
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer	22
3. Gabriel Vahanian	28
4. Paul Van Buren	34
5. William Hamilton	40
6. Thomas J. J. Altizer	47
7. Dorotheé Sölle	53
8. Herbert Braun	55
9. William Mallard	56
10. Alistair Kee	58
Summary	61
CHAPTER 2: Religion and the Secular	63
Being "Christian"	63
Religion	65
1. Weil	66
2. Bonhoeffer	68
3. Vahanian	70
4. Van Buren	72
5. Hamilton	74
6. Altizer	76
7. Others	78
Summary: Religion	81
The Secular	82
Summary: The Secular	88
CHAPTER 3: Jesus	89
1. Simone Weil	89
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer	90
3. Gabriel Vahanian	91
4. Paul Van Buren	93
5. William Hamilton	95
6. Thomas J. J. Altizer	98
7. Dorotheé Sölle	101
8. Herbert Braun	102
9. William Mallard	103
10. Alistair Kee	104
Summary	106

CHAPTER 4: Other Themes	107
Transcendence and Immanence	107
Summary: Transcendence and Immanence	113
Faith, Belief and Doubt	114
Summary: Faith, Belief and Doubt	120
Man and His Proper Life	120
Summary: Man and His Proper Life	130
CHAPTER 5: Summary of Christian Atheism	132
The Way of Negation	132
The Secretly Sacred World	132
Understanding Life Atheistically	134
General Comparisons	135
 B. Buddhism	
CHAPTER 6: Preliminary Comments	138
Introduction	138
Two Systems	141
CHAPTER 7: Theravada General Teaching	143
The First Truth	144
The Second and Third Truths	148
The Eightfold Path	151
Meditation	155
Nirvāṇa	162
CHAPTER 8: Specific Theravada Teachings	166
The Dharma Theory	166
The Buddha and the Religious Life	174
Theism and Theology	181
CHAPTER 9: The Mahayana System	186
A Fundamental Reworking	186
Śūnyatā	187
Prajñā	191
Buddhas and Bodhisattvas	194
The Bodhisattva Doctrine	194
Buddhology	199
Summary	202
CHAPTER 10: Theravada and Mahayana:	
A Summary	206

## PART II: ANALYSIS

## A. The Christian Atheists and Buddhism

CHAPTER 11: Simone Weil	213
The Divine Movement	213
Suffering	220
Impermanence and Soullessness	225
Contemplation	232
Summary	237
CHAPTER 12: Focusing on the World	240
Dietrich Bonhoeffer	240
Secularity	240
Autonomy	246
William Hamilton	251
Summary	255
CHAPTER 13: A Functional Problem	256
Gabriel Vahanian	256
Iconoclasm	256
Anthropology	260
Dorothee Sölle	266
Summary	267
CHAPTER 14: The Atheistic Analysis	269
Paul Van Buren	269
Methodology	269
Other Similarities	275
Herbert Braun	278
Alistair Kee	279
Summary	282
CHAPTER 15: The Sacred World	284
Thomas J. J. Altizer	284
Three Themes	284
The Dialectical Method	291
William Mallard	299
Summary	301

## B. The Structure of Christian Atheism

CHAPTER 16: Collapse of the God/World Dualism	303
Choosing the World	303
The Designation "Secular"	307
Salvation in the World	313
Religion	317

CHAPTER 17: Atheistic Theology	320
Personal and Free	320
The Complexity of Dialectics	326
CHAPTER 18: The Secular Sacred	332
Between Materialism and Theism	332
Understanding the Secular Sacred	335
The Rejection of Nihilism	340
CHAPTER 19: Heterodoxy and Orthodoxy	345
Identifying the Problem	345
On Taking Atheism Seriously	348
Taking Secularism Seriously	353
CONCLUSION	357
On Being Christian	357
On Being Atheistic	361
BIBLIOGRAPHY	368

## Preface

It should be noted that footnotes contain only that information necessary to identify the author and/or work cited and that full publishing information will be found in the Bibliography. Articles and essays which constitute titled, independent works were listed in the Bibliography as well as is the volume in which they appeared where there was one. In the text, where several quotations from one source appear in the same paragraph, a single footnote at the end of that paragraph serves for all. Unless there is more than one author with the same last name the first name will not appear in the footnote. William Hamilton is an exception to this rule for works by him are merely indicated by the last name "Hamilton" but the other Hamilton, Kenneth Hamilton, will always be designated by both his first and last names.

I am deeply appreciative both of the opportunity to do intensive studies in the area of religious atheism and of the assistance and support which I received while working on the thesis. In particular I should like to thank New College for allowing me to develop this program of studies, the library for their assistance in obtaining books, Miss MacLaren and Dr. Brockington for their time and advice, and James Gray for being a perfect companion to a Doctoral candidate even while himself in that same situation. Finally, I am especially grateful to the several bodies within the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States of America which supported this project with their generous grants.



## INTRODUCTION

At first glance many Christians would say that an atheist is one who does not believe in God, that religion has to do with one's relationship to God, and that Christianity is the religion par excellence and therefore is definitely a matter of theistic belief. In fact, the use of the words "God," "religion," and "Christianity" is considerably more problematic than such a simple outlook recognises. This thesis is an exploration of some of the problems involved and an attempt to demonstrate in what manner the terms "religious atheist" and "Christian atheist" are meaningful.

From the outset it is perhaps easy to designate Buddhism as a form of "religious atheism" and the ten subjects of our study by contrast as "Christian atheists." This usage assumes a broad category--religious atheism--which may be represented by the belief system of individuals from any part of the globe and which is represented by most, if not all, Buddhists as well as, we shall argue, our ten Christian subjects. Likewise it assumes that the adjectives "Buddhist" and "Christian" may be used to qualify the term "religious atheist" by indicating which religious tradition most strongly and decisively contributes to the cultural context of a given religious atheist.

### The Problem of "God"

The problem posed by the general Christian assumptions about religion will not be so easily disposed of as by a simple designation of usage. The key to this lies in that first assumption that an atheist is one who does not believe in God. Even here there are two foci. First, "the term 'God' lacks

clear, univocal meaning which can be unanimously communicated,"<sup>1</sup> as S. Paul Schilling so clearly states. Secondly, and in consequence to some extent of the first, "the word 'atheism' is very imprecise."<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, to define the atheist as one who does not believe in God, is to introduce the question of what one means <sup>by</sup> with such an expression. The Christian might again seek simplicity in his response. Thus he could introduce the credal formula and assert that by "God" is meant "the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth."<sup>3</sup> Alternatively he might refer to one of the statements of belief born in the milieu of the reformation and its aftermath:

One living and true God, everlasting,  
without body, parts, or passions; of  
infinite power, wisdom and goodness; the  
Maker, and Preserver of all things both  
visible and invisible.

--Article 1, Articles of Religion<sup>4</sup>

There is but one only living and true God,  
who is infinite in being and perfection, a  
most pure spirit, invisible, without body,  
parts, or passions, immutable, immense,  
eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most  
wise, most holy, most free, most absolute,  
working all things according to the council  
of his own immutable and most righteous  
will, for his own glory; most loving,  
gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abun-  
dant in goodness and truth, forgiving  
iniquity, transgression, and sin; the  
rewarder of them that diligently seek him;  
and withal most just and terrible in his  
judgements, hating all sin, and who will  
by no means clear the guilty.

--The Westminster Confession of Faith<sup>5</sup>

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1. Schilling, God in an Age of Atheism, p. 120
  2. Hibblethwaite, The Council Fathers and Atheism, p. 8
  3. The Apostles Creed and The Nicene Creed, The Book of Common Prayer, p. 15
  4. The Book of Common Prayer, p. 603
  5. The Westminster Confession of Faith, pp. 6-7

Recently, in line with this tradition, H. P. Owen defined God as "the Creator, who is infinite, self-existent, incorporeal, eternal, immutable, impassible, simple, perfect, omniscient and omnipotent."<sup>6</sup> Kai Nielsen attempted to formulate standard Christian belief in God in this way:

God . . . is taken to be the creator of the universe and, as we have seen, he is thought to be transcendent to the universe though somehow immanent in the universe in the sense of being active in the universe. But he is still conceptualized as being distinct from the universe (the world), though indeed he manifests himself in the universe. <sup>7</sup>

Nels Ferré tells us that "God is the supreme being, not only distinguishably more and other than the world who yet works in the world, but also who is a separate being."<sup>8</sup> William O. Fennell offers the minimal formulation of "some kind of transcendent divine being who is related meaningfully and purposively to the world of nature and to human history."<sup>9</sup>

Such formulations as these attempt to express what might well be called, and frequently is called, "classical theism." Alternatively, it may be called simply "theism." However it is designated, it represents "a particular view of God,"<sup>10</sup> a view in which God is separate and the world is dependent,<sup>11</sup> in which God is "a Being which is unique, unitary, incorporeal, infinitely powerful, wise and good, personal but without passions and the maker and preserver of the universe."<sup>12</sup>

6. Owen, Concepts of Deity, p. 1

7. Nielsen, Scepticism, p. 46

8. Ferré, "God without Theism," Theology Today, Oct., 1965, p. 373

9. Fennell, "Religion Post Mortem Dei," The Meaning of the Death of God, Murchland (editor), p. 153

10. Ferré, op. cit., p. 373

11. Ogden, "Faith and Secularity," God, Secularisation and History, Long (editor), p. 36

12. Flew, God and Philosophy, p. 28

If this is what is meant in the statement that an atheist is one who does not believe in God, the statement may be revised to specify that the atheist is one who rejects "theism" meaning the understanding of God which such traditional definitions as those above attempt to verbalise. Such a revision confronts us with the imprecision of "atheism" for now its meaning is dependent upon the meaning of the word "God" and it ceases to identify those hypothetical purists who reject all possible understandings of "God." This suggests, as Ferré sees, that "a person can call himself an atheist and still believe in God who is not theistically understood."<sup>13</sup>

As the ordinary Christian may have difficulty recognising his God in the theological or philosophical definitions of theism and may sense the threatened distortion of his usual meaning which Ferré puts his finger on, he may come to recognise what Steeman pointed out: "We call somebody an atheist . . . in so far as we miss in him the belief in God as we understand God."<sup>14</sup> Such a shift in the meaning of atheism however, will serve no purpose of the believer attempting to keep the issues simple, making its meaning dependent on the proliferation of understandings of God which are to be found among men.

One might attempt to then argue that "atheism (is) the deliberate, definite dogmatic denial of the existence of God"

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13. Ferré, op. cit., p. 373

14. Steeman, "Psychological and Sociological Aspects of Modern Atheism," Concilium: Atheism and Indifference, p. 24



where God is "the God of the religious consciousness."<sup>15</sup> Such a line of thought would seek to identify the issue with some internal, universal experience of God preceding conscious conceptualisation or verbalisation and would thereby designate an attitude or response and involve one in an argument over the meaning of "belief" and "experience." This forces theology into a psychological mode and thereby abandons the traditional and popular usage of the phrases "believe in God" or "accept theism" as referring to cognitive activities.

It seems all too clear, as Steeman says, that "atheism cannot be detached from the image of God which it rejects,"<sup>16</sup> and this means quite simply that "atheism" as it is usually used and as we use it, does not entail, necessarily, the rejection of "God" but only of one or more meanings of the word and specifically those meanings which are associated with the word "theism" are involved in this activity.

If the assumption is followed that the traditional and popular belief in God generally assigned to Christianity can be designated as "theism" any rejection of this belief (which, admittedly, may find diverse expression while sharing some common core) would be a-theism. One potential difficulty with such a use is its narrow base. Atheism by this understanding is a phenomenon linked to the Christian proclamation. Yet, as the Second Vatican Council recognised, both the Moslems and

15. Borne, Atheism, p. 8

16. Steeman, op. cit., p. 29



Jews share "theism"<sup>17</sup> which is not distinctively Christian, as Shubert Ogden points out<sup>18</sup> and as is apparent from the formulations of it which are given here.

To cope with this situation, the use of atheism may be broadened to include the traditional formal understanding of God shared by the three great Western religions: Judaism, Islam and Christianity. This understanding lies behind Cardinal König's belief that the roots of atheism are found only in the Western world<sup>19</sup> and that as Steeman sees it, atheism rejects the dominant religious notions of Western culture.<sup>20</sup> Atheism is thereby a phenomenon linked not just to Christianity but to that broad concept: Western culture.

Such a way of viewing the matter supports the deep chasm between East and West and implies that the oriental religions are implicitly atheistic because of their separation from theistic culture. To call Buddhism atheistic is therefore to recognise its oriental character more than to comment on the status of the concepts for "God," "god" or "gods" which it might contain. It is superfluous therefore to speak of "atheistic Buddhism" as Buddhism by cultural position cannot be other than atheist.

Yet we are not concerned here with vast cultural differences but with differences between men regardless of whether they belong to the same culture or not. Atheism must therefore be

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17. Lumen Gentium (The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), Article 16; The Documents of Vatican II, Abbott (editor), pp. 34-35

18. Ogden, op. cit., p. 29

19. Quoted in Hibblethwaite, op. cit., p. 83

20. Steeman, op. cit., p. 29

confined to the specific understanding of God designated as "theism" without intending thereby any single formulation whether cultural (Western), religious (Christian, Moslem, Jewish), or dogmatic (credal, confessional, personal).

This is to admit that no single or simple definition of the God of the theists exists which does not merit possible challenge from theists. For pragmatic purposes, therefore, the functional meaning of theism which underlies its subsequent use in this thesis is represented by a "traditional" and "orthodox" belief to which many Christian thinkers have attempted to give expression and which is represented in our quotations from the Creeds, the Articles of Religion, the Westminster Confession, Owen, Nielsen, Ferré, Fennell and Ogden.

Atheism is the rejection of this "traditional" and "orthodox" theism. However even as that theism is rife with subtle difficulties and discrepancies, its rejection has yet to be defined in terms of its extent and its precise nature. Our functional definition therefore is decidedly preliminary and will merit further refinement in the course of the development engaged in here. Even as atheism cannot be separated from what is understood by "God" or "theism," one can expect that the meaning of these terms will become clearer with the specific designation of what is denied by a given atheism.

Just as no definition of "God" or "theism" merits unchallenged acceptance, neither does any simple definition of atheism. If belief in God can include a multitude of highly disparate affirmations, unbelief can reflect a vast spectrum of disagreement as well. This is only to say, of course, that the terms

being used here demand definition or some explication of their use. If there was a time when their meaning was clear without this, this is not such a time.

### Religion and Christianity

To define atheism as the rejection of a specific conception of God known as theism is still not to solve its questionable status as a potentially "religious" reality. Thus when John Reid expresses the general understanding of religion as man's relationship with God<sup>21</sup> he implicitly leaves room for an atheism which relates to a non-theistic God and is therefore religious. To avoid this he would need to specify that the God intended in his statement is the God of theism--at least by our use of these words. Indeed, as it happens, Reid would do this for, following Aquinas, he specifies that all other positions than traditional orthodox theism are atheistic.<sup>22</sup>

Clearly, if we are to speak of a religious atheism without embroiling ourselves all over again each time in the problem of "God," an understanding of "religion" in which the use or non-use of God is indeterminate must be arrived at. Contrary-wise, refusal to do so can only lead to a judgement of the orient as not only atheistic but irreligious as well. All non-theistic religions could only be seen as not, in fact, true religions.

Definitions of religion which avoid the problem of "God" (or god) are not new. Clifford Geertz attempted just such a

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21. Reid, Man Without God, p. 88

22. Ibid., p. 20

definition when he conceived religion as a cultural system or specifically as:

- (1) A system of symbols which acts to
- (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men
- by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence, (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. 23

Robert Baird attempted a far simpler one which drew on Paul Tillich's concept of ultimate concern.<sup>24</sup> For the purposes of this study we would suggest that the following understanding will function best:

A religion is a tradition of myths, symbols and dogma which tends to cohere in a specific understanding of man and the world and tends to reveal strong cultural linking. Buddhism and Christianity are taken to be exemplary of this.

To be religious is to take one or more religions as profoundly important to one's understanding of oneself and one's world and to use the materials of that religion (those religions) in this process of understanding.

In our usage therefore a religious atheist is one who is religious but not theistic. It is also obvious that the religious atheist will be a heterodox phenomenon in theistic religions and an orthodox phenomena in atheistic religions therefore, but it is not obvious that the use which a religious man makes of religious traditions will necessarily be formulated as either theistic or atheistic. Our concern is that he involve himself with the materials of religion and not, at this point with the degree of freedom and originality which he may or may not display in the process.

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23. Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," The World Yearbook of Religion, Cutler (editor), p. 643

24. Baird, Category Formation and the History of Religions, p. 18



Religious atheism is identifiable by the fact that, without affirming theism, "it invests the natural world from which divine presence and providence have been totally excluded, with theological significance," as Susan Anima Taubes puts it;<sup>25</sup> or expresses ultimate concern, as John Cooper describes it;<sup>26</sup> or possesses "a powerful element of nonidolatrous faith" as Samuel Miller elucidates in speaking of the "structure of religious atheism."<sup>27</sup> Indeed the religious atheist may well find himself attempting to answer the same questions as the theist<sup>28</sup> and thus be closer to him than his non-religious associates who are neither concerned with nor able to use the religious materials of their culture.

Implicit in what we have said of religion is the definition of Christianity by which we are operating. "Christianity" is taken as a specific religious tradition, as indeed Buddhism is taken as another specific religious tradition. Each possesses not only its own materials but its own history of the use made of those materials by men both individually and in groups. One is not identified with a given tradition, therefore, because he reflects the uses made by the majority--i.e. is orthodox, but because the key to his religious quest and expression is to be found in the materials available to him from that tradition.

A man's religious tradition is identifiable by the myths, symbols and dogmas which emerge in his religious activities. So long as these possess currency that tradition will continue to live even though the specific understanding of man and his

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25. Taubes, Susan; "The Absent God," Toward a New Christianity, Altizer (editor), p. 107

26. Cooper, The Roots of Radical Theology, p. 167

27. Miller, Samuel; The Dilemma of Modern Belief, pp. 51-52

28. MacIntyre, "The Debate about God," The Religious Significance of Atheism, MacIntyre and Ricoeur, p. 55



world toward which it tends undergoes the most radical reformulations or fragments into many such understandings. Perhaps Hinduism could be considered an example of the latter situation in the extreme and Islam an example of the most rigorous attempt at uniformity.

That "Christian religious atheism" may seem full of internal contradictions is doubtless due to, more than anything, the highly conservative and conforming forces which have characterised Christianity. Nevertheless if each word is taken in the context intended for this study, the three can be used together for designating the use of materials from the Christian tradition by those deeply involved with such materials and with the whole Christian tradition who nevertheless do not understand man and his world in the usual manner designated as "theistic."

#### Matters of Perspective

Three further points must be made explicit with regard to the perspective of this thesis. The first is the acceptance and acknowledgement of a tendency which some might well argue is distinctly "Western" or Occidental, to segregate the religious aspects of one's life from supposedly non-religious aspects. This reaches deeply into the thorny issues related to the term "secular" with which this thesis is deeply involved. Nevertheless our meaning here is even more fundamental than that distinction and has rather to do with a perpetual inclination to break human existence down into categories such as "religious." This is accepted, although not uncritically and thus not without modification of a conscious effort to

control it, because it is understood to be inevitable to some degree and because it is assumed that the result is only different from and not necessarily inferior to a hypothetical perspective resulting from the opposite tendency.

The second but related point is that the perspective here will be predominantly philosophical rather than theological, historical or anthropological. By this we mean that it is not a contribution to the theology of religion, the history of religion, or to the anthropological study of homo religiosus as much as it is a contribution to the philosophy of religion. It will be less dependent upon orthodox dogmatic judgements, historical roots or the actual practices of ordinary believers than it will upon ideas, thoughts, abstractions provoked by or expressed through religious materials and encountered on their own merit. Obviously no final separation of these disciplines is possible, but just as certainly a preferred perspective can be assumed, and some pattern of consistency maintained with regard to it.

Finally, language must be recognised as creating a distinctive bias of its own. When, as in the case of this thesis, ideas are developed in one linguistic structure only--namely English--it must be understood that they are adapted to it if originally formulated in another language. This process of adaptation is clearly acknowledged and its corollary made explicit: The ideas are treated as they find expression in English. Certainly an effort can be made to grasp the original meaning, especially through the study of the original language, but in the final analysis translation is always interpretation and must always be recognised as such even when the differences are so miniscule or subtle as to elude clear identification.

In the case of Buddhism this is a particularly important point. Many of the concepts are culturally linked in the most profound sense and the linguistic barrier reflects this. The result is that one who is not a native to Buddhist culture and language can never fully possess the Buddhism of those who are. This is not to say that the Western student of Buddhism cannot arrive at a fuller and richer understanding of its propositions on a philosophical basis than can the Buddhist peasant, for example, but it is to say that his sophisticated understanding of Buddhism will differ significantly from that of the learned Buddhist of a Buddhist country.

It is best, perhaps, for the sake of clarity and freedom, to suggest that our understanding of Buddhism is an interpretation which, with the growth of Buddhist literature in English, develops its own traditional formulations and expressions. It thus merits acceptance for what it is: English (designating language not ethnic group) Buddhism. A Buddhist who is a native of a Buddhist country and who has become a scholar of the English language might quarrel with the results of this process but his difficulty at that point is only ours in reverse: English Buddhism is as difficult for him to grasp without interpretation producing its effects as is Sanskrit or Pali Buddhism (for example) difficult for us.

In summary therefore, we can state that this thesis will consider the phenomenon of religious atheism as it developed in the Christian context roughly between the years 1933 and 1972,<sup>29</sup> and found expression in the writings of ten persons:

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29. Beginning with the entries in Simone Weil's diaries which are profoundly religious and ending with Van Buren's The Edges of Language, published in 1972.

Simone Weil, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Gabriel Vahanian, Paul Van Buren, William Hamilton, Thomas J. J. Altizer, Dorothee Sölle, Herbert Braun, William Mallard and Alistair Kee.

The order in which the Christian atheists are given here and which is generally followed throughout the thesis, is of no great significance although it reflects the chronological order of their appearance as significant contributors to Christian atheism. It should be noted that in the case of both Simone Weil and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, publication in English of the materials with which we are concerned did not occur until the 1950's although the diary entries and letters were written prior to or during 1944.



## PART I: GENERAL SURVEY

## A. Christian Atheism

## CHAPTER 1: God

There are three categories of religious atheism represented in the persons we are studying. The first might be described as that of a basically simple atheism. It is an attempt to get at the idea that there is no God, in the sense of rejecting all theistic meanings for the word. This category, Category I, is so clearly atheistic that it makes our somewhat pains definitions in the Introduction seem unnecessary. In general terms one can say that where it is found, the mood is secular and profane in the sense of denying the otherworldly or supernatural and affirming in straightforward terms the completeness of the man-and-his-world unity.

The second, Category II, could well be referred to as a case of "suspended theism." It represents the position taken when the problem of theism is felt to be located in and confined to man. Thus atheism is seen as a given condition in which one finds oneself, always accompanied by a reserve or silence of something unsaid and unfinished. The vague shadow of what Reid called non-theistic concepts of divinity,<sup>1</sup> if not of classical theism itself, haunts the tone and context of this atheism.

The third, Category III, does not represent a fundamental denial of God, nor a description of man as atheistic for some reason having to do strictly with him. Rather it is an atheism

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1. Reid, op. cit., p. 16



of a Divine process and it suggests that God is changing in some manner which the Christian observes as a movement from a theistic universe to an atheistic one. Change initiated by God is creating an atheistic climate.

Thus in Category I, man sees no God; in Category II, man is not able to see God; and in Category III, man sees God becoming no God. Alternatively one might put it: Category I is a hard atheism in a Christian context; Category II is an atheism rooted in the doctrine of man or theological anthropology; and Category III is an atheism rooted in the doctrine of God.

#### 1. Simone Weil

Immediately with Simone Weil we discover that atheists do not always represent only one of the three categories, for hers is rooted both in her vision of God and in her understanding of man's situation. Thus one side of Weil's atheism is essentially metaphysical. Here Weil conceives of God as creator but as creator of his own divine movement which changes nothing and reveals his own non-existence.<sup>2</sup>

To communicate this vision Weil employs a variety of themes. She speaks of God's withdrawal which is a movement of love even as creation is the creation of love.<sup>3</sup> Added to this is the concept of a deifugal force and a divine renunciation "which permits a part of being to be something other than God."<sup>4</sup> However a third motif returns the second to the position of the

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2. Weil, Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks (subsequently referred to as: Intimations of Christianity), p. 93

3. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 28

4. Weil, Intimations of Christianity, p. 193

first: The creation is a compact mass of obedience which responds to God's creation of it and renunciation of himself in it by its own renunciation which Weil calls decreation.<sup>5</sup>

Thus in a complex manner the whole universe may be seen as God's activity within himself by which he experiences the extremes of himself. He is not himself by withdrawal, abdication and renunciation, and this not-himself aspect of God may be variously called creation and designated as a deifugal force. As creation however it returns the empty side of God to himself by the act of decreation, the renunciation of its own createdness, and the turning of the divine love back toward itself so that it becomes self-love.

In order to engage in this self-negating, self-restoration movement however, God empties himself<sup>6</sup> and this self-emptying is an eternal diminution which it is easy for Weil to speak of as God's eternal feeding upon himself.<sup>7</sup> Thus the movement which accounts for God and the universe alike is a divine activity described variously as self-love, self-contemplation, self-eating, diminution, emptying, creation/decreation.

Weil's image is of a dynamic emptiness which because it is dynamic is better served with the form "emptying" to designate an eternal shrinking due to the diminishing effects of self-eating which is at once the divine life and the divine love which everything is. God in his own extremity, the emptiness

5. Weil, Intimations of Christianity, p. 193; Gravity and Grace, pp. 28 and 33

6. Weil, First and Last Notebooks, pp. 70, 140, 297

7. Weil, Intimations of Christianity, p. 149; Waiting on God, p. 87

of his own being, is the not-God as well as the is-God. To envision God as did Simone Weil is to envision utter Godlessness and its extreme contrast, taken together as a dynamic reality of circular movement for which negative ontology is most appropriate and imputations of substance and existence are least appropriate.

From the standpoint of man in creation the reality of this God is encountered first of all in his non-existence. Man must know God as non-existent, he must pray to God "with the thought that God does not exist"<sup>8</sup> and he must love God which means that he must love "what does not exist, while knowing it does not exist."<sup>9</sup> God is "that which is worthy of love, but which in our sense of the word existence, does not exist."<sup>10</sup>

Relative to this problem for the soul of loving the non-existent, Weil tells us:

I am quite sure that there is a God in the sense that I am quite sure my love is not illusory. I am quite sure that there is not a God in the sense that I am quite sure nothing real can be anything like what I am able to conceive when I pronounce this word. But that which I cannot conceive is not an illusion.<sup>11</sup>

Thus Weil indicates that while one root of atheism is in the very nature of God, the other is in the very nature of man. Man simply cannot know God as existent.

Atheism is thus the proper process of keeping God "hidden and nameless in the soul."<sup>12</sup> When it is sustained it purifies

8. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 19

9. Weil, First and Last Notebooks, p. 323

10. Ibid., p. 324

11. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 103

12. Ibid., p. 49

men of seeking a God for consolation.<sup>13</sup> Because of his withdrawal, abdication and renunciation, God is weak and impartial in the world and he changes nothing whatsoever.<sup>14</sup> Thus in no way can God help, console or contribute to men's condition. Atheism is true for it knows this truth about God.

However, a man may have no experience of God yet not deny him as would the atheist. Such a man knows "the false God who is like the true one in everything except that we cannot touch him" and is prevented by that false God "from ever coming to the true one."<sup>15</sup> In the non-atheistic case "we have to believe in God who is like the true one in everything, except that he does not exist, since we have not reached the point where God exists."<sup>16</sup>

Thus Weil conceives idolatry and atheism as the only two possible responses to God, but the former is handicapped because it gives way to the need to believe which is a form of seeking consolation from God, so that Weil considers the atheist is nearer to God than the idolater.<sup>17</sup> Atheism is a discipline which correlates with the truths which can be known about God.

Weil hallows the lack of the experience of God by correlating that condition with the absence of God which is the way men understand the withdrawal of God in creation--his deifugal flight from himself which diminishes him and empties him so that he might love himself, contemplate himself and eat

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13. Ibid., p. 104

14. Ibid., p. 101

15. Ibid., p. 103

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.



himself. Thus Weil can tell us that "the absence of God is the mode of divine presence" and that "he who has not God within himself cannot feel his absence."<sup>18</sup>

Man must realise that God being what he is and the creation being what he is also, "God can only be present in creation under the form of absence."<sup>19</sup> Man therefore loves what is absent<sup>20</sup> as well as non-existent. This atheism is, therefore, a mode of love which knows that it can have no object and that it does not have its beloved. Yet the love is there whether it assumes an idolatrous or atheistic form so long as the experience of God's absence, of no experience of God, or God's non-existence is there.

Not surprisingly Weil also sanctifies suffering in her vision. Thus in the creation of his own extremes, Weil tells us that God himself:

. . . went to the greatest possible distance, the infinite distance. This infinite distance between God and God, this supreme tearing apart, this agony beyond all others, this marvel of love, is the crucifixion. Nothing can be further from God than that which has been made accursed.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed the cross becomes the very form of the Godhead and thus of creation, in Weil's formulation:

The two halves of the Soul of the World are crossed, one upon the other; the cross is oblique, but all the same it is a sort of cross. But opposite to that crossing point the two halves are joined and welded, and the whole is enveloped by a circular movement, a movement which changes nothing, which curls upon itself;

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18. Ibid., p. 24

19. Ibid., p. 99

20. Ibid.

21. Weil, Waiting on God, p. 68



the perfect image of the eternal and blessed act which is the life of the trinity.<sup>22</sup>

Suffering is therefore the very structure of the Divine, of totality and thus of creation. It is as much a characteristic of God as is emptiness and love.

Likewise it is a characteristic of the world and man's existence in the world. We know it as imprisoning necessity, inconsolable affliction, the torment of loving what does not exist, of knowing that our creation is brought to fulfillment in its decreation.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the very self-emptying which decreation actualises the absence of God and may thus be described as "redemptive suffering"<sup>24</sup> since God's absence is at once his mode of presence and his self-crucifixion.

Man's confinement to atheism is thus established in two structurally related modes: 1) man's inability to identify God because God is not existent and present but emptying and withdrawing; and 2) man's character as creature which by definition means his place in that movement of God named "absence" and "withdrawal" and "abdication." These are, ultimately, but two approaches to the one truth of man's being without God and represent forms of both Category II and Category III atheism.

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22. Weil, Intimations of Christianity, p. 68

23. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 99; First and Last Notebooks, pp. 323 and 324

24. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 24

## 2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Bonhoeffer's Letters and Papers from Prison are notorious for their fragmentary and sketchy theology, and those letters which contain the materials of greatest relevance to us, are typical in this regard. It is even doubtful that Bonhoeffer would be included in this study were it not for the later influence of the thoughts he expressed, primarily in the Spring and Summer of 1944, since his development along these lines was in such a preliminary stage. Largely because of his later influence however, it would now be unthinkable to exclude him.

This influence is explicitly acknowledged. Paul Van Buren, for example, speaks of a Post-war radical theology which is based on Bonhoeffer and as such can be regarded as "a general movement." In the same vein, he describes Letters and Papers from Prison as "just the kind of thing my generation was looking for."<sup>25</sup>

William Hamilton testifies to the impact of Bonhoeffer's thought when he cites his Letters and Papers from Prison as pages which "held a sort of desperate importance" and the acquaintance of which he listed as one of three events signaling "the slow deterioration in me of that good old world of middle-of-the-road ecumenical neo-orthodoxy."<sup>26</sup> Also he specifically says that Bonhoeffer's "greatest importance to the death of God theology . . . (is) in helping us work out a truly theological understanding of religionlessness."<sup>27</sup>

25. Mehta, The New Theologian, pp. 54-55 (from an interview between the author and Van Buren)

26. Hamilton, "The Shape of Radical Theology," Frontline Theology, Peerman (editor), p. 69

27. Hamilton, "The Death of God Theologies Today," Radical Theology and the Death of God (subsequently referred to as Radical Theology), Altizer and Hamilton (editors), p. 40

Hamilton even once wrote that "a strong case can be made that the most decisive theological influence on the younger generation of protestants today is Dietrich Bonhoeffer."<sup>28</sup> In this regard he cites three crucial themes of Bonhoeffer's: The world's coming of age; the need for a religionless Christianity; and a shift from theology to ethics as participating in the sufferings of God.<sup>29</sup> Hamilton believed Bonhoeffer brought a movement "from theology, apologetics, criticism of culture, the problem of communication, and even from hermeneutics, to the shape and quality of our lives."<sup>30</sup>

Thomas J. J. Altizer cites one of Bonhoeffer's teachings that (in Altizer's words): "The presence of Christ can be known only in the body of a broken and suffering humanity, for the Jesus whom we know is wholly detached from the divine attributes of his traditional image."<sup>31</sup> To this he responds that "for the first time in its history, theology is now called to a radically kenotic Christology."<sup>32</sup> Only such a combination as Bonhoeffer's "'religionless Christianity' with a life without God may be judged to be fully radical," Altizer asserts.<sup>33</sup>

These references show the intricate relationship with, and heavy dependency on, Bonhoeffer's thought of a time less than a year before his death. As Van Buren, Hamilton and Altizer are themselves such committed explorers of the problem which has drawn our attention, their reference back to Bonhoeffer indicates our need to turn our attention in that direction as well.

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28. Hamilton, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer," Radical Theology, Altizer and Hamilton (editors), p. 113

29. Ibid., pp. 115-118

30. Ibid., p. 118

31. Altizer, "Word and History," Radical Theology, Altizer and Hamilton (editors), pp. 135-136

32. Ibid.

33. Altizer, Toward a New Christianity, p. 111

Bonhoeffer's theology in this period, focused on first of all what might be called God's superfluity. This is the correlate to the world's coming of age, for with that phenomenon, "knowledge and life are thought to be perfectly possible without (God)" since he "is being increasingly edged out of the world."<sup>34</sup> Thus Bonhoeffer sees God "relegated to the realm beyond experience,"<sup>35</sup> and as "superfluous as a Deus ex machina" which would have in the past solved problems and provided support in instances of human failure.<sup>36</sup> The tendency, in the face of this eradication of the traditional areas for the identification of God, would be to relegate him "to some last secret place" but Bonhoeffer rejects even this as a meaningful treatment of the issue of God.<sup>37</sup> God cannot any longer be regarded as a stop-gap.<sup>38</sup>

If God is thus no longer something on which man can clearly be shown to be dependent and if it can clearly be shown that man is unable to experience him as well, then it is apparent that there is a problem in finding "a place" for God. In several letters Bonhoeffer suggested that the center of man's life, man's "strongest point," man's strength and not his weakness, might be the locus of God.<sup>39</sup> He also referred to God as "the 'beyond' in the midst of our life."<sup>40</sup> Yet it is hard to see anything revelatory of God in the life of autonomous and

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34. Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 114

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid., p. 93

37. Ibid., p. 118

38. Ibid., pp. 103-104

39. Ibid., p. 93; p. 104; p. 118

40. Ibid., p. 93



secular man which he himself will see and recognise as indicative of the divine. Thus these expressions of Bonhoeffer's have generally been found to be infertile and are acknowledged but then laid aside.

During the latter part of July, 1944, Bonhoeffer seemed to reverse his approach. God's new homelessness in man's existence is not now described in the context of autonomous man and the world come of age, but in the context of God's own act of forsaking us in an effort to make us "live in this world without using him as a working hypothesis" and to teach us "that we must live as men who can get along very well without him." The initiative has passed to God who is not now edged out of the world by man's new maturity but who abdicates to force on man that new maturity and to assume a new locus for himself: The Cross. This led to Bonhoeffer's second theological focus: God's weakness and suffering.<sup>41</sup>

Bonhoeffer now speaks of Christ helping us "by his weakness and suffering," and he describes God as "weak and powerless in the world." He sees the Bible as directing us "to the powerlessness and suffering of God" because "only a suffering God can help" and because it is by his weakness that he "conquers power and space in the world."<sup>42</sup>

While working with this theme, Bonhoeffer makes two of his most famous statements. "Before God and with him" he says, "we live without God."<sup>43</sup> The statement summarises the theology of

41. Ibid., p. 122

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.



both this focus and the earlier one. God is impotent in man's life. He is without place or position from which he may effect change, answer questions and offer help. Yet Bonhoeffer will not abandon the concept of God's presence and reality. Whatever they mean however, they must be understood in the light of our basic godlessness. Paradoxically again, Bonhoeffer suggests that even though the world is more godless than in the past "perhaps it is for that very reason nearer to God than ever before."<sup>44</sup>

This development thus far would clearly seem to be an apology for autonomous, secular life which exists without recourse to deity yet knows of the deity. The whole impetus of Bonhoeffer's expressions here drives toward the explicit development of some concept of process. Logically Bonhoeffer could not explain such knowledge unless it came from a past when God had a place in man's life and performed functions for him. Implicit in his thought is an approval of a process by which God weans man of dependency on him and leaves man to a world without any divinity but the memory of that one which had once been a factor in that past period of the world.

With the introduction of the language of suffering, however, a subtle shift is given to this theology, and it is in this context that a second often quoted statement of Bonhoeffer's is set. "Man is challenged to participate in the sufferings of God at the hands of a godless world," he thus writes.<sup>45</sup> In some sense help and conquest both have meaning in relation to

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<sup>44</sup>. Ibid., p. 124

<sup>45</sup>. Ibid., p. 122

God's suffering and powerlessness, and in some similar sense it would seem man's suffering takes on a meaning for which the word "participation" may be appropriate. In this light the impotent God is also the suffering God and Christian man knows God both through the Bible and through the act of living as a Christian, and as an autonomous man in a world come of age.

Fragmentary though it may be, then, Bonhoeffer's theology in these letters suggests that the Christian can only know God as superfluous, powerless and suffering. Such a God is clearly not the God of classical theism and is just as clearly not the effective and effecting divinity of other non-theistic adaptations of classical theism. It is not just that the ancient heresy of patripassionism is restated and broadened (God himself suffers), but that as well, the classical divine attributes are both denied and replaced by their contraries as far as man is concerned. In the end, suffering alone must bear anything divine in the mature world, yet without affecting that world which is whole without it.

Thus Bonhoeffer would seem to combine the characteristics of both Category II atheism which conceives man as the locus of the problem, and Category III atheism which conceives some process in God accounting for it. Man becomes autonomous and his world comes of age in such a way that there is no longer any place or role for God. Correspondingly, God is in a process of forsaking man so that he will learn to live without God, and is assuming a role of suffering and powerlessness which, even though Bonhoeffer speaks of it as helping man, changes nothing of that autonomy and godlessness which now constitutes man's proper and inevitable nature. Man on his part is both without God and, as such, suffering with God.

### 3. Gabriel Vahanian

Biblical transcendentalism claims, according to Gabriel Vahanian, that "man and the world are God's creation; therefore God is wholly other than what he creates and neither man nor the world is conceived as a self-efficient and self-reliant entity."<sup>46</sup> This "wholly other" God stands behind the dilemma of God which Vahanian labelled "the death of God" and which, in his writings, he describes again and again as a cultural occurrence.

Given this premise, it is not surprising that there is a motif of mystical vocabulary in Vahanian. Thus he champions the principle "that the finite cannot comprehend the infinite (finitum non est capax infiniti)" and the transcendental categories stand for Vahanian whether or not they are recognised by the "cultural religiosity."<sup>47</sup> God must be, Vahanian asserts, in that he is inevitable, wholly other and wholly present.<sup>48</sup> Initially then, the ultimate truth of Biblical thought is defended in the face of the situation which Vahanian goes on to describe.

The difficulty arises when God "becomes a cultural accessory or a human ideal," for when that happens, he dies, precisely because of his transcendent nature.<sup>49</sup> Vahanian insists that there is nothing sacrilegious in speaking "of the death of God or of God as the chief failure of man," for one is

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46. Vahanian, The Death of God, pp. 14-15

47. Ibid., p. 231

48. Vahanian, "Beyond the Death of God," The Meaning of the Death of God, Murchland (editor), pp. 11-12

49. Vahanian, The Death of God, p. 231

in so speaking, referring to the ethnolatrous concept by which a culture would attempt to take God into its own form and content.<sup>50</sup> Such concepts remain valid, however, "only so long as they spearhead the spontaneous expression of a particular human experience" and they live "only so long as their cultural framework lasts."<sup>51</sup>

This natural tendency of the cultural concept to lose its efficacy and life must be expected if God is, ultimately, beyond man's ability to comprehend him. For Vahanian, the process in our time and culture is part of the death of the Christian era and our passing into a post-Christian age.<sup>52</sup> He blames Christendom for this, calling it (by the reverse of Kierkegaard's judgement) "the fundamental misfortune of Christianity."<sup>53</sup> It is to him but another name for Western culture, however, and he sees an irony in the fact that Christianity created it and that it, in our day, "changed our world into a no-God's land."<sup>54</sup>

If it is natural for cultural concepts of God to die because they must ultimately fail to comprehend him, Vahanian sees the need to create such concepts as equally natural. This tendency he designates as "religiosity" and castigates it as "the paraphernalia of faith in God."<sup>55</sup> Even in times such as ours when the cultural concepts of God are dead or dying,

- 50. Vahanian, "The Future of Christianity in a Post-Christian Era" (subsequently referred to as "The Future of Christianity"), Toward a New Christianity, Altizer (editor), p. 255
- 51. Ibid.
- 52. Vahanian, The Death of God, pp. 229-230
- 53. Vahanian, "Beyond the Death of God," op. cit., p. 3
- 54. Ibid.
- 55. Ibid., p. 11



religiosity as such survives on in idolatrous forms. Nor is such religiosity confined to "the canons of any of the traditional historical religions"<sup>56</sup> so that it is not surprising to find in the wake of the Christian God's death a radically new secular and immanentist form emerging.<sup>57</sup>

This religiosity displays a secularism which would make itself at home in the world and results in an anthropocentrism which is the heart of immanent attitudes and outlook.<sup>58</sup> With this change God can no longer be identified "as prime mover or universal sustainer of the world of phenomena" nor can there be "any ready-made codes, whose enforcement depends on inquisitorial procedures or on obscurantist theologies."<sup>59</sup> What Christianity had bequeathed to the world no longer carries the force of cultural assent. Put otherwise, "Western culture is practically immunized against Christianity" and, put conversely, the Christian tradition itself has been culturally neutralized.<sup>60</sup>

The result from the theological point of view is another dimension yet of the atheism implied by the death of God--the first dimension being the loss of a valid cultural theology, which loss reveals man's essential religiosity. This new dimension is the acknowledged atheism of our time, to which God's ultimate irrelevance is a more meaningful statement than whether he is real or just an idea.<sup>61</sup> Thus Vahanian can emphasise that to this modern mentality "God is dead, not in sheer intellectual scaffoldings, but in the down-to-earth give

56. Vahanian, No Other God, p. 31

57. Vahanian, The Death of God, p. XXXII

58. Vahanian, No Other God, p. 18; The Death of God, p. 187

59. Vahanian, The Death of God, p. 193

60. Vahanian, "The Future of Christianity," op. cit., p. 164

61. Vahanian, The Death of God, p. 187



and take of the human condition."<sup>62</sup> In this new awareness resulting from the transition from transcendence to immanence the "superfluity of God--whether he is or not--is the predicate."<sup>63</sup>

Vahanian would thus agree with Bonhoeffer that man is moving away from a reliance on "supernatural crutches."<sup>64</sup> In the "thorough-going scientific view of reality" possessed by modern man, God is no longer necessary: "He is irrelevant--he is dead,"<sup>65</sup> for the "meaning-giving center of the universe" whatever it is, "cannot be called God."<sup>66</sup> Vahanian also agrees that God "cannot be taken for granted" nor can he "be used merely as a hypothesis, whether epistemological, scientific, or existential, unless we should draw the degrading conclusion that 'God is reasons.'"<sup>67</sup>

God's death is thus two-sided: The loss of our cultural concept of him and the substitution of a worldview which believes itself to be independent of him. Even so, Vahanian insists that God's death "belongs wholly to, and is grounded in, man's natural inclination to religiosity."<sup>68</sup> Thus even given these atheistic expressions, "man is not an atheist, except by contrast with an established theism," and thus Vahanian anticipates either "the recovery of our classic transcendental categories" or God's being "renaturalised into an immanental force."<sup>69</sup>

62. Ibid.

63. Vahanian, No Other God, p. 16

64. Vahanian, "The Future of Christianity," op. cit., p. 265

65. Vahanian, The Death of God, p. XXXII

66. Ibid., p. 193

67. Vahanian, "Beyond the Death of God," op. cit., pp. 11-12

68. Vahanian, The Death of God, p. 6

69. Vahanian, "The Future of Christianity," op. cit., p. 257

This demonstrates however, a curious complexity in Vahanian's thought, for man is seen as both necessarily projecting idolatrous concepts of God and as being godless in the wake of the loss of the cultural concept of God and its replacement by an autonomous and anthropocentric worldview. Thus Vahanian states that man now "directly experiences" God's absence and death so that "it is a practical awareness by which authentic existence often is measured."<sup>70</sup> Likewise the resultant contemporary atheism "however strange . . . is in fact an atheology of man without God."<sup>71</sup> Therefore even for valid theology Vahanian has taken our situation in the context of God's death so seriously as to demand a "methodological atheism" with which to respond to the cultural phenomenon.<sup>72</sup>

It would seem Vahanian feels modern theology to be confronted with two vast chasms of error. On the one hand, the theologian may cling to the culturally abandoned concept of God, which anyway had reached idolatrous proportions to become that paraphernalia of religiosity Vahanian so abhors. On the other he can invert his former theism into a contemporary atheism. Here again however, he faces two threats: an atheology or atheism which affirms and glories in the new immanentism, and a profane secularism which adopts a scientific worldview to which God is irrelevant. Vahanian gives expression to all these dangers and condemns them all.

The fundamental affirmation of the God who is "wholly other" cannot, given Vahanian's analysis, find expression in

70. Vahanian, The Death of God, p. 187

71. Vahanian, No Other God, p. 17

72. Ibid., p. 82

any culturally viable form, however, and it is for this reason that he proposes a methodological atheism by which the theologian admits that he can neither speak of God nor abandon his obligation to acknowledge the transcendent. By it he admits that he feels impelled toward faithfulness to a God which he no longer has.

Vahanian is thus a clear and surprisingly consistent Category II atheist. Atheism is commended because of the realities of man's present condition. God remains what he has always been and man confronts the fundamental truth about their relationship: Finitum non est capax infiniti. This confrontation occurs because of (1) the collapse of Christendom and its ethnocentric concepts of God; (2) the growth of man's autonomy exemplified in the new scientific worldview which makes God irrelevant and underwrites a radical immanentism; and (3) an ever-present idolatrous tendency which prevents a pure and simple atheism and results in the constant substitution of what are, in one form or another, essentially false gods for the unattainable and unconquerable spectre of transcendent deity.

Thus Vahanian seems to be saying what Bonhoeffer did when he spoke of man's autonomy and the world's coming of age, but to Vahanian these are not symptoms of a divinely appointed process but instead, of man's incipient religiosity and idolatry. Likewise Vahanian responds theologically by conceding to the possession of a theology informed by Biblical transcendentalism but empty of cultural expression--and thus empty as well of relevance to post-Christian man. In light of this situation he accepts a methodological atheism by which to avoid

the pitfalls of man's nature and his cultural situation combined. Like Weil he prefers atheism to idolatry and sees no alternative to these.

#### 4. Paul Van Buren

Paul Van Buren in his first book, The Secular Meaning of the Gospel, chose to abandon "a straightforward use of the word 'God'"<sup>73</sup> because, as he put it (in opposition to Nietzsche), "the word 'God' is dead."<sup>74</sup> By this he meant that the word "equivocates and misleads," that "it seems to be a proper name, calling up the image of a divine entity, but it refuses to function as any other proper name does."<sup>75</sup> Thus, he speaks of our empirical difficulty with "talking about God at all" as "we do not know 'what' God is, and we cannot understand how the word 'God' is being used."<sup>76</sup>

In these terms he developed the weakness of Christian theism and attempted to write theology which interpreted the Gospel "on the basis of certain empirical attitudes"<sup>77</sup> and which would be concerned for, among other things, "the logical analysis of theological statements."<sup>78</sup> In this task he utilised "the modified verification principle"<sup>79</sup> and engaged in "a careful, functional analysis of the language of the New Testament, the Fathers, and contemporary believers."<sup>80</sup> Before such an onslaught of secular devices it is not surprising that no

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73. Van Buren, The Secular Meaning of the Gospel, p. 100

74. Ibid., p. 103

75. Ibid., p. 145

76. Ibid., p. 84

77. Ibid., p. 20

78. Ibid., p. 18

79. Ibid., p. 156

80. Ibid., p. 19



supernatural or transcendent deity could be maintained and thus he would afterwards refer to this kind of theology as "empirical and--let us say--a-theistic."<sup>81</sup>

Later Van Buren would write of The Secular Meaning of the Gospel as not having been "anything more . . . than an invitation . . . to look at the matter in question in a certain way,"<sup>82</sup> and he would undertake qualifications, clarifications and entirely new approaches as a result of the fact that the book on reflection is valued by him primarily because it "served to help over a hump"--that of his own theological past.<sup>83</sup> Modified though his thought in it may have been, however, he continued to deny a straightforward use of the word "God;" continued to approach the problem which it raises predominantly through modern empirical, logical and linguistic considerations; and most sharply differs from it in a willingness to take that problem more seriously and directly and not to brush it off quite so abruptly as he did in that work.

Over a period of years following the publication of The Secular Meaning of the Gospel, Van Buren would write a series of articles (later collected and published in his second book, Theological Explorations) tackling the problem of God in quite different ways. Thus he once suggested that "if we are to work within the dualities of human experience," it might be specifically a doctrine of God which "must be given up for the time being." This he felt was called for because of the "too modern,

81. Van Buren, Theological Explorations, p. 67

82. Ibid., p. 104

83. Van Buren, "Theology in the Context of Culture," Frontline Theology, Peerman (editor), p. 48

. . . too literal, too prosaic, too unimaginative" characteristics of modern theologians such as himself who were also guilty of "accepting too uncritically the culturally privileged status of the language of factuality, explanation and the ordinary." In this mood he shys away from "too much clarity, explanation and precision . . . about matters which have led men of other ages to tremble," and suggests that "God" might be located "within the metaphorical language of imagination and insight." The shift from the rigid and closed anti-theism of The Secular Meaning of the Gospel is clearly demonstrated by such an approach.<sup>84</sup>

At one point Van Buren also picked up on Bonhoeffer's "vor und mit Gott leben wir ohne Gott" ("before and with God we live without God") which Van Buren felt gave voice to the belief that "the theism of Western thought, the theism, for example of Descartes . . . was superfluous to Christian faith." He notes that Descartes would doubtless have considered Bonhoeffer an atheist (as we do) and Van Buren himself suspects that Bonhoeffer wished to go beyond saying that Christian faith did not commit one to such theism and assume instead the stronger statement that the Christian should specifically reject it. If this is, indeed, at least a part of what Bonhoeffer intended with the cryptic sentence, Van Buren clearly finds agreement with him.<sup>85</sup>

Also during this time, Van Buren suggested that we consider "the possibilities of the hypothesis of a limited God within a

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84. Van Buren, Theological Explorations, pp. 180-181

85. Ibid., p. 111; pp. 114-115

pluralistic universe,"<sup>86</sup> and he tells us that what he has called "the dissolution of the absolute" resulted in his recognition of "a pluralistic society and a pluralism of values and understandings."<sup>87</sup> Again, he develops the idea that it is "certain men's sense of limitation which gives rise to language about God" in that they "are struck by the ordinary, whereas most find it only ordinary."<sup>88</sup> These men have had difficulty speaking of God "not because God was beyond this world and experience, but precisely because they were speaking of this world of human experience" which they knew "in such a way that words failed them."<sup>89</sup> This kind of speechlessness, Van Buren suggests, may be a greater boon to theology than another doctrine of God.<sup>90</sup>

Van Buren's book The Edges of Language, took up the problem of God with a singlemindedness which reversed his treatment of it in his first book. He continued to argue against regarding God "as a name for the object of awe" because as he now puts it, that use "depends upon too limited a view of language."<sup>91</sup> He tells us that "'God' as a discrete concept regardless of context is simply not the same word 'God' that occurs in religious discourse" where it is "at the center of a complex linguistic pattern and the role it plays is related to everything else that the religious person wants to say."<sup>92</sup>

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86. Ibid., p. 125

87. Ibid., p. 38

88. Ibid., pp. 168 and 170

89. Ibid., p. 181

90. Ibid.

91. Van Buren, The Edges of Language, p. 135

92. Ibid., p. 70

Van Buren does not see himself alone in this treatment of God, and he tells us that he wants to argue "that while there have certainly been Christian theists, there has also been at the least an important, at the most the central, strain of Christianity which has consistently refused to allow the use of the word 'God' like that presupposed in the argument between theists and atheists."<sup>93</sup> In fact, Van Buren sees the ability to circumvent the issue of theism versus atheism as one of the advantages to his linguistic analysis which shows "that it is of no particular concern to a Christian."<sup>94</sup>

Still, Van Buren is more critical of theism than those statements would suggest, for he calls it "an unlikely possibility for educated Christians today" and describes it as "open to serious accusations of conceptual confusion" which, even if they were met, would result in "a religious fundamentalism that seems scarcely worth the battle."<sup>95</sup> In the same vein he describes as "the most widespread misuse" of the word "God" that use which makes it "a word which is supposed to refer to, or name its object."<sup>96</sup>

In The Edges of Language, Van Buren speaks of "God" as "a word marking the outer edge of language" and one which is uttered "when one wants desperately to say the most that is possible" so that "its use is the final speech act at the limit of language."<sup>97</sup> This use relieves the word of the need to

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93. Ibid., p. 133  
 94. Ibid., pp. 3-4  
 95. Ibid., p. 33  
 96. Ibid., p. 137  
 97. Ibid., p. 133



"stand the tests of coherence" which rules what Van Buren calls "the great central plains of our talk."<sup>98</sup> Thus, the attributes of God become "the subjects about which the Christian tries to say more than our ordinary linguistic conventions allow,"<sup>99</sup> and to say that everything depends upon God is to acknowledge the centrality of the word to every other feature of our "religious discourse."<sup>100</sup>

In acknowledging this use of "God," Van Buren admits that we are given "a largely absent presence, an unmentionable name of what is neither to be imagined, nor pictured, nor otherwise re-presented," and that faithfulness to this God must be measured "by how a man lives and walks ahead in life" rather than by the development of some inner state.<sup>101</sup> "Finally," Van Buren says, "this God is not a finished, fixed or identifiable figure, person or concept" but rather "a future coming to meet men" which "waits somewhere out ahead of man."<sup>102</sup>

In none of these affirmations does Van Buren open the door for any transcendent or "wholly other" deity which someone like Gabriel Vahanian would not only not close the door to but indeed for which he would prop the door open with his methodological atheism. Van Buren's atheism is thus that of Category I. It is a simple atheism, albeit one which grows from the simple rejection of the use of the word "God" to a complex linguistic analysis of its use designated to vindicate its place

98. Ibid.

99. Ibid., p. 139

100. Ibid., pp. 70-71

101. Ibid., p. 75

102. Ibid., p. 76

in religious discourse without obligating one to traditional theism. Thus despite the intricate meanings which Van Buren links to the word, especially in The Edges of Language, he consistently denies that it designates any reality beyond that inhabited by man linguistically.

### 5. William Hamilton

William Hamilton is one of those who has experimented with a wide variety of ways of speaking about the problem of God and who has himself assumed positions over a wide spectrum of attitudes about it. Thus we find him first of all confessing that "if there are men today who can do without God, it still seems to be true that we cannot do so," and that he himself, and men like him, are afraid of themselves without God.<sup>103</sup> Hamilton also speaks of the experience of the death of God radical theologians as "not a simple not-having, for there is an experience of loss," which for some is painful, for others not, but "is loss nonetheless."<sup>104</sup>

Hamilton has given considerable attention to the painful aspect of the problem of God, speaking predominantly in terms of knowing God as only "a pressure and a wounding."<sup>105</sup> We know a little of what divinity means also "because of its wounding presence in our hearts"<sup>106</sup> he says, and similarly, he describes God as "there when we do not want him, in ways we do not want him, and he is not there when we do want him."<sup>107</sup>

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103. Hamilton, The New Essence of Christianity, p. 64

104. Hamilton, "American Theology, Radicalism and the Death of God" (subsequently: "American Theology"), Radical Theology, Altizer and Hamilton (editors), p. 6

105. Hamilton, The New Essence of Christianity, p. 164

106. Ibid., p. 87

107. Ibid., p. 63

Ivan Karamozov is an example of this awareness for Hamilton, who describes the character from Dostoevsky's great novel as experiencing far more agony by the possibility of the existence of God than he could ever experience from his non-existence.<sup>108</sup>

As indicated by Hamilton's analysis of Ivan Karamozov as testing God "on the basis of a standard of justice" and finding that God fails the test,<sup>109</sup> his own failure to arrive at a satisfying theodicy lies behind some of Hamilton's early difficulty with God. He believes that this difficulty is not his alone, however, as "the problem of suffering has become a major barrier to faith for many sensitive believers."<sup>110</sup>

It was in the context of this earliest stage of his atheism that Hamilton followed Bonhoeffer in speaking of the suffering of God. He felt that God's suffering must be affirmed<sup>111</sup> and chose the impotence or weakness of God over God's power.<sup>112</sup> Likewise, he felt that some men need to rebel against God, accusing him "of injustice or impotence or irrelevance, in order to know who he is,"<sup>113</sup> and he foresees the emergence of "the impotent God, suffering with men"<sup>114</sup> in such modern religiousness. At one point he declared Bonhoeffer's statement that "man is challenged to participate in the sufferings of God at the hands of a godless world" as "one of the most inexhaustible, significant, and hopeful sentences written in our time."<sup>115</sup>

108. Hamilton, "Banished from the Land of Unity," Radical Theology, Altizer and Hamilton (editors), p. 63

109. Ibid.

110. Hamilton, The New Essence of Christianity, p. 42

111. Ibid., p. 92

112. Ibid., p. 91

113. Ibid., p. 135

114. Ibid., p. 52

115. Ibid., p. 152

However, from the first there was an equivocation in Hamilton's attitude over the image of God's wounding presence with its related images of the unjust suffering in the world and of an impotent and himself suffering God. He senses the "abdication from the world" which the usual theology of God would represent, and speaks on the one hand of being led "to reject it, not to welcome it at all,"<sup>116</sup> as it comes in the form of a wounding presence. Yet, contrary to that rejection, he had also spoken of the need for God even should he be known only in this manner.<sup>117</sup> Thus we find Hamilton stranded between a sovereign and omnipotent God who must be interpreted to have abdicated from the sufferings of men who know only his wounding presence, and the impotent and suffering God who offers no relief but the challenge of participation in suffering.

In this dialectic between abdication and presence, omnipotence and impotence, is also inherent the dialectic between the presence and absence of God. One can feel the tension between the two in The New Essence of Christianity, but just as he will later assert that "absence has won a decisive victory over the presence" in the death of God,<sup>118</sup> he will opt to speak in decisive, non-dialectical tones which reject such terms as "absence," "disappearance," "eclipse," or "hiddenness," precisely because they "still live quite comfortably within the classical tradition of the dialectic between the presence and absence of God."<sup>119</sup>

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116. Ibid., p. 87

117. Ibid., p. 64

118. Hamilton, "The New Optimism," Radical Theology, Altizer and Hamilton (editors), p. 168

119. Hamilton, "The Shape of Radical Theology," op. cit., p. 73



Thus Hamilton evolves into a "harder" atheism from this first stage which shared so much in common with Bonhoeffer. Ved Mehta may have caught him in the process of entering into that more decisive period when Hamilton said to him in the course of an interview that he was "still waiting and hoping for God to rise up again" but that he was "beginning to feel that the time has come . . . to put up or shut up, . . . to be an in or an out."<sup>120</sup> With this shift, Hamilton enters enthusiastically into the use of the phrase "death of God" which he tells us he uses "as a metaphor describing something that is happening to a particular group of modern Western Christians today."<sup>121</sup>

Specifically Hamilton speaks of what is happening as "the deterioration of the portrait of the God/man relation as found in Biblical theology and the neo-orthodox tradition."<sup>122</sup> Also he describes it as the realisation that "God is not in the realm of the necessary at all . . . . He is one of the possibilities in a radically pluralistic spiritual and intellectual milieu."<sup>123</sup> As such he is, however, a possibility rejected by those who speak of the death of God.

Hamilton says that when he speaks of the death of God, he and the others who use the phrase, speak "of the death in us of any power to affirm any of the traditional images of God" by which they intend to assert that "the world is not God and that it does not point to God."<sup>124</sup> This early representation of a

120. Mehta, The New Theologian, p. 50

121. Hamilton, "The Shape of Radical Theology," op. cit., p. 73

122. Hamilton, "The Death of God Theologies Today," op. cit., p. 35

123. Ibid., p. 40

124. Hamilton, The New Essence of Christianity, pp. 86-87

later more explicit and hard atheism, is naturally buttressed by his evolution to a point of asserting that "it is really that we do not know, do not adore, do not possess, do not believe in God."<sup>125</sup> In this he seems to be trying to avoid any hint of equivocation whatsoever.

Interestingly, Hamilton's attitude became more optimistic as his atheism became more specific and the early problems of suffering ceased to be central. Instead he cites optimism as one of the characteristics of an "emerging radical theology"<sup>126</sup> asserting that:

By optimism I do not mean insensitivity to suffering and tragedy, and I do not mean inevitable progress. Nevertheless radical theology is both describing and relating itself to a new feeling of hope and optimism . . . , a conviction that substantive changes in the lives of men can and will be made. This new optimism is trying to discipline itself to say Yes to the world of rapid change, new technologies, automation and the mass media.<sup>127</sup>

Again, a few months later, he wrote an article entitled "The New Optimism" in which he identified three areas in which a change of sensibility from pessimism to optimism was occurring: The social sciences, art and the civil rights movement. Oddly, he chose "for the fun of it," January 4, 1965 as a date for the change of sensitivity--the date, he tells us, of T. S. Eliot's death and Lyndon Johnson's State of the Union message. He speaks here of an optimism "that even the really intractable

125. Hamilton, "The Death of God Theologies Today," op. cit., pp. 27-28

126. Hamilton, "The Shape of Radical Theology," op. cit., p. 75

127. Ibid.

problems that have marked our civilized period can be overcome, problems as apparently irreducible as war and mental illness."<sup>128</sup>

In this development we catch the clearly implicit assumption that man can do better without God than he did with God for as Hamilton sees it "the new optimism is both a cause and a consequence of the basic theological experience which we today call the death of God."<sup>129</sup> Also there seems to be something of a reaction against his earlier emphasis on suffering when he tells us that if he has seen the new mood of optimism rightly:

. . . then we might be able to conclude that tragedy is culturally impossible, or unlikely. We trust the world, we trust the future, we deem even many of our intractable problems just soluble enough to reject the tragic mode of facing them.<sup>130</sup>

In the various attitudes and beliefs of Hamilton's expressed thus far, it is hard to determine immediately those which might have initiated Thomas J. J. Altizer into what he called "the possibility of a consistent kenotic Christology" and for which he gave credit to Hamilton.<sup>131</sup> However, in The New Essence of Christianity, Hamilton wrote of "a God withdrawing from all claims to power and authority, and sovereignty and consenting to become himself the victim and subject of all that the world can do," with the net result that "the afflicting God" becomes "the afflicted God" and divinity "consents to abide in the world and allow the world to have its way with it."<sup>132</sup>

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128. Hamilton, "The New Optimism," op. cit., pp. 159-160

129. Ibid., p. 168

130. Ibid., p. 169

131. Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, p. 11

132. Hamilton, The New Essence of Christianity, pp. 86-87

Also Hamilton attempts Christologies which emphasise the image of Jesus as "a place to be, a standpoint" and identify that place as alongside the neighbor;<sup>133</sup> or, alternatively, which speak of discerning Jesus "beneath the worldly masks."<sup>134</sup> He relates this to theology by suggesting that Jesus as a place may be the meaning of his divinity<sup>135</sup> and Jesus in the world may be, as "our way to our neighbor" and "our way to Jesus Christ," also "the place for the waiting for God."<sup>136</sup> Thus through Christology, Hamilton attempts to locate some meaningful divinity in the world and it is not wholly surprising that the context of such an enterprise is that of his "softer" atheism in which such a phrase as "waiting for God" is not out of place.

Insofar as there is some "kenotic theology" in these brief developments, it is nevertheless neither conscious of itself as such nor consistent. Still, such developments present the possibility of seeing God, through Jesus, in a process of revealing an entirely new image of divinity--an utterly worldly and immanent divinity. This thread, visible here and there in Hamilton's writings, could easily be taken as representative of Category III atheism which derives from a divine process which divinely destroys the God of classical theism.

All of this only goes to illustrate the breadth of Hamilton's participation in the atheistic treatment of the problem of God, however, for it is also quite clear that in his

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133. Hamilton, "Thursday's Child," Radical Theology, Altizer and Hamilton (editors), p. 92

134. Hamilton, "The Death of God Theologies Today," op. cit., p. 50

135. Hamilton, "Thursday's Child," op. cit., p. 92

136. Hamilton, "The Death of God Theologies Today," op. cit., pp. 41-42 and 48



"hard" statements which became more dominant as the 1960's progressed, Hamilton at least attempts to assume a clear-cut and straightforward atheism of the Category I variety which simply denies that theism is a true position. By the same token, when he speaks of our loss and the breakdown of the dialectic of absence and presence, and certainly when he speaks of "waiting for God," there is the recurring theme of a Category II atheist who feels that something is happening to man but seems unshakable in the implicit faith or hope that divinity itself is untouched.

That these themes should not lend themselves to easy isolation and clear distinction from each other, and that Hamilton should be found giving expression to attitudes and beliefs consistent with, for example, Category II atheism, in the same article in which he also gives expression to attitudes and beliefs consistent with Category I and Category III,<sup>137</sup> is perhaps the aspect of most singular importance to Hamilton's role in and contribution to this area.

#### 6. Thomas J. J. Altizer

Altizer's first book, Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology, recognised modern man's alienation from the sacred--the reality of faith--and "the very abyss of faith in which we must live."<sup>138</sup> Likewise it recognised "a chasm . . . between the deepest reality of the Christian faith and the

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137. cf. Hamilton, "The Death of God Theologies Today," op. cit.:

p. 28	"We do not believe in God"	Category I
p. 48	"waiting on God"	Category II
p. 50	"Jesus beneath the worldly masks"	Category III

138. Altizer, Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology, (subsequently: Oriental Mysticism), p. 9

expression of that reality in Western history and civilisation."<sup>139</sup> That chasm resulted, Altizer then believed, because Christianity had put on the mask "of a world affirming form of faith,"<sup>140</sup> and had evolved "a religious path that made the Christian at home in the world."<sup>141</sup> Originally, however, it had been founded "upon a radically world-denying religious way,"<sup>142</sup> and represented "the ultimate form of rebellion against 'reality,' as 'the will to nothingness pronounced holy.'"<sup>143</sup>

This position would be, on some counts, exactly reversed, however. He would continue to believe that man had become alienated from the transcendence which, in that first book he had called "religious reality." He tells us that the awareness of this--the "certainty of the death of God in modern history and experience"--was something to which he came as early as the Summer of 1955.<sup>144</sup> His attitude toward this would shift from one of criticising this characteristic to affirming it, however.

Likewise, he would now affirm Christianity's own world-affirmation and its "making the Christian at home in the world," thus retaining his earlier analysis but reversing his evaluation of it. These changes represented a realisation "that there is no possibility for us of reversing our history and that our only hope lies in moving through our radically profane consciousness to a new and yet Christian coincidence of the radical sacred and the radical profane."<sup>145</sup>

139. Ibid., p. 10

140. Ibid., p. 156

141. Ibid., p. 157

142. Ibid.

143. Ibid., p. 112

144. Altizer (editor), Toward a New Christianity, p. 301

145. Ibid.

Thus what does not change is Altizer's diagnosis of man's loss of the experience of God, of the worldly form of Christianity which had evolved, and of the need to rediscover the sacred--albeit in some unexpected form. What does change is his condemnation of man and of Christianity (its world-affirming character) which becomes acceptance and development of these facts of modern life. Also the rediscovery of the sacred remains a goal, but now it will be sought in our own reality and not in some final "absolute negation of the Given."<sup>146</sup>

In Altizer's earlier understanding of man's difficulty with the sacred, he blamed a theology which had grounded its understanding of God in an understanding of being which produced at best a partial and fragmentary grasp of God as "the religious reality."<sup>147</sup> He felt then that "the Christian must come to know the Nothing as the higher side of God,"<sup>148</sup> and become totally immersed in the religious reality so that "all awareness of the world is either suspended or dissolved."<sup>149</sup>

By his second book, Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred, Altizer was well into the shift which reversed this theology and sought not to abandon the profane in favor of the sacred but to seek the sacred in the profane. Thus he sees the crucial factor to be "the positive religious significance of modern man's choice of the profane."<sup>150</sup> This he feels forces us to "face the full dialectical implications of a radical negation of the sacred," and while he accused Eliade here of

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146. Altizer, "The Sacred and the Profane," Radical Theology, Altizer and Hamilton (editors), p. 144

147. Altizer, Oriental Mysticism, p. 194

148. Ibid., p. 197

149. Ibid., p. 174

150. Altizer, Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred (subsequently: Mircea Eliade), p. 103

refusing to follow, Altizer forges ahead, grasping "the possibility that an ultimate coincidence of the opposites could reconcile the radical sacred and the radical profane."<sup>151</sup>

This then, is the basic format for Altizer's theology: A dialectical move negating a former transcendent sacred which stood in opposition to and in judgement on a profane reality which is now affirmed, and will lead to the ultimate attainment of a coincidencia oppositorum of that sacred and profane. Within this format Altizer places specifically Christian imagery and materials, although in such novel arrangements and meanings that many have refused to call the result Christian.

The first principle of Altizer's theology is the death of God, by which he refers to "a final and irrevocable event."<sup>152</sup> Understanding the meaning of this event is perhaps, he suggests, "the greatest theological problem of our time."<sup>153</sup> In his own interpretation the meaning is surprisingly direct and leaves no "God above God or a Godhead lying beyond the God who appears in history or religion."<sup>154</sup> Rather it is precisely that transcendent which man has in the past encountered as alien to him, as awesome and uncanny, which is now dead.<sup>155</sup>

Altizer dares to call this message "good news," a designation which suits his description of that now dead reality as Satan. The classical deity could easily be understood as "the power enclosing energy and stilling movement, the power of darkness standing over against and opposing all light and life."<sup>156</sup>

151. Ibid.

152. Altizer, "Word and History," op. cit., p. 126

153. Ibid., p. 124

154. Ibid., p. 134

155. Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, p. 96

156. Ibid., p. 97



This results naturally when it is subjected to a mystical awareness of the void implicit in the unrelenting claims of the divine attributes. It is this that Altizer has seen and now divines as dead and names, following William Blake, as the arch enemy of man and of man's reality--that is, as Satan.<sup>157</sup>

Altizer refers back to his own previous theology when he points out that "the Christian God can be manifest and real only by means of a faith engaging in an absolute world and life-negation, a negation that must occur wherever there is energy and life."<sup>158</sup> Now perceiving this and accepting the implications of his own choice of the profane, he sees God's death as liberating man "from every alien and opposing other" which, Altizer believes, will make possible "the final coming together of God and man."<sup>159</sup>

The death of God however, is not just an event but also a process by which the Word or Spirit moves "more and more fully into the body of the profane."<sup>160</sup> This occurs by virtue of God's self-negation in Christ, a development which results in the Christian God becoming gradually "more alien and beyond, receding into a lifeless and oppressive form, until it finally appears as an empty and vacuous nothingness."<sup>161</sup> That Altizer takes this process to have historical literalness is indicated by his statement that "we are inheritors of a history in which God was actually present."<sup>162</sup>

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157. Ibid., pp. 96-97

158. Ibid., p. 101

159. Ibid., p. 107

160. Ibid., p. 109

161. Ibid.

162. Altizer, "Creative Negation in Theology," Frontline Theology, Peerman (editor), pp. 80-81



The time of the death of God is thus the time of God's absence, of his missing, of his withdrawal, of his presence to us only in his absence.<sup>163</sup> The reverse side of this truth is what Altizer calls "the forward movement of the incarnate Word" which is "from God to Jesus" and then continued, always kenotic in nature, "from the historical Jesus to the universal body of humanity, thereby undergoing an Epiphany in every human hand and face."<sup>164</sup>

In Altizer's thought, therefore, the death of God is meaningless apart from that kenotic and incarnational result--kenotic because the form of the transcendent God becomes increasingly empty and alien; and incarnational because the Word becomes ever more one with man. Thus the crucifixion can be known both as the "negation of transcendence," and "the embodiment in history and experience of the divine process."<sup>165</sup>

The ultimate implication of Altizer's formulation is the incarnation of the sacred in the profane, that "resurrection of the profane in a transfigured and thus finally sacred form"<sup>166</sup> by which that original quest, begun even before his first book, is satisfied. Altizer's genius, if such it can be called, is to give to Christianity a retelling of the myth which affirms the Christian's atheism, choice of profane reality, and aversion to the transcendent. It uses a dialectical method to destroy the tension and opposition of the basic categories of sacred and profane, immanence and transcendence, promising ultimately that even God and man will process into a new unity.

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163. Altizer, "Word and History," op. cit., pp. 134-135

164. Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, p. 83

165. Ibid., p. 120

166. Altizer, "The Sacred and the Profane," op. cit., p. 155

In many ways the deep mystical tones and the poles of negative theology are never absent from Altizer's work throughout its stages. Likewise he never abandons his dream of giving value to both the sacred and the profane in his attempt to reformulate for modern man a vision which he believes to be Christian. In his own strange and elusive way he seems as deeply imbued with piety as did Simone Weil, although, like Weil, it drove him to a profound and intricate atheism.

Altizer's atheism however makes sense only within the model of Category III. Man knows God as dead because he has died and because his death is a deliberate self-emptying. Man does not suffer from some imperfection which prevents him from knowing a transcendent deity, nor is it the case that he can make no sense of theism or the belief that there ever was a reality named by the word "God." On the contrary, there was a God, and because that God chose to negate himself--an event of which man is knowledgeable--man must accept that there now is no God. Atheism is faithfulness to the divine process it affirms.

#### 7. Dorotheé Sölle

"The death of God" in Dorotheé Sölle's opinion, describes "the historical condition under which the absolute appears today."<sup>167</sup> This constitutes "an event which has taken place within the last two centuries of European history and which conditions every aspect of life."<sup>168</sup> For many people the experience is such that it does not lend itself to the usual

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167. Sölle, Christ the Representative, p. 10

168. Ibid.

atheism or theism debate, being characterised instead by an "oscillation between them" and an "inability either to answer or to drop the question concerning the meaning of existence and the purpose and goal of history."<sup>169</sup>

Sölle thus sees man as unable to arrive at a theistic faith because he possesses no viable concept of the absolute; but yet because of the nature of his life as "an absurd situation midway between meaninglessness and the longing for meaning," she feels that man must have God represented to him. This latter conclusion is a non-logical one but one which, under the circumstances, she believes is forced upon us.<sup>170</sup>

In Sölle's theology, Christ becomes God's representative and God is described as absent and helpless in the world,<sup>171</sup> so that in fact he is unable to be in the world immediately and must be mediated into it.<sup>172</sup> Through Christ, God's new representation in the world is "profane and worldly . . . established in helplessness and suffering."<sup>173</sup> This representation rests on the need of the "dead" God to be represented and on the provisionality of that representation.<sup>174</sup> Thus God has not abdicated and become finally superfluous, nor "declared himself fully within the world," but neither, because of the representation, has he lost his place in the future.<sup>175</sup>

This representational Christology of Sölle's is thus a rescue attempt, designed to save the victim of man's present

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169. Ibid., pp. 11-12

170. Ibid., p. 132

171. Ibid., p. 150

172. Ibid., p. 141

173. Ibid.

174. Ibid., p. 137

175. Ibid., p. 134



situation--namely God--so that if and when the situation changes God can again function for himself. Yet, in speaking of God's representation as worldly, helpless and suffering, Sölle may appear to provide for a new image of the Divine to emerge. In Sölle's thought however, any process implied would have to be within man or for man's changing situation and perception. The God of classic theism seems to be both well protected and untouched by the language of representation. If there is radical implication for orthodox theology it is in the doctrine of the Trinity and not directly in the doctrine of God. Sölle therefore, is a clear example of Category II atheism.

#### 8. Herbert Braun

Herbert Braun is a New Testament scholar whose concern is that "the New Testament reckons naively with the existence of a deity" and, insofar as it does so "is thus alienated from us who are no longer able to make such a presupposition."<sup>176</sup> His solution is not unlike Van Buren's in terms of its technique, for he looks at those references to God in the New Testament and analyses their context. What he discovers from this activity is that "even according to the New Testament, God in the final analysis . . . is where I am placed under obligation, where I am engaged; engaged in unconditional 'I may' and 'I ought!'"<sup>177</sup>

To Braun this means that God is implied in man's relation to other men, and thus "every instance of a relation with one's

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176. Braun, "The Problem of a New Testament Theology," Toward a New Christianity, Altizer (editor), p. 337

177. Ibid., p. 215

fellow man" which possesses "something of the intimate connection between the 'I may' and 'I ought'"<sup>178</sup> is theistic in the sense of Braun's interpretation of the New Testament. His clear Category I atheism implicitly consecrates man's ethical realm by its elevation to a replacement for the doctrine of God in New Testament theology.

#### 9. William Mallard

William Mallard defines himself specifically as atheistic in terms of being "anti-theistic" if Kant's definition is accepted for theism.<sup>179</sup> He rejects therefore, the theism of "a transcendent, intelligent, and freely active God, present ruler over the world," because "it does not permit the full Incarnation of the Divine in which the 'personality' of God is real only as the actual selfhood of Jesus," and because "it offers a rationalistic description of the divine essence, disallowing the full mystery of the Infinite as approached through the via negativa."<sup>180</sup>

These two points not only reveal Mallard's view of the weakness of theism, but implicitly contain the key to his own theology. Mallard believes that "the reality of God finds description in relation to the vital events moving towards, through and beyond the ministry of Jesus."<sup>181</sup> This reality he has called "the terrible form of the Infinite as the incommensurable meeting of the Void and the Wrathful" which, through

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178. Ibid.

179. Mallard, "A Perspective for Current Theological Conversation," Toward a New Christianity, Altizer (editor), p. 337

180. Ibid.

181. Ibid., p. 330

Jesus, "negates its abstract, meaningless form," thereby actualising a whole series of changes: The transfiguration of Transcendence and the conversion of Wrathful Majesty into "a simple, suffering dignity,"<sup>182</sup> among them.

This process is spoken of by Mallard as the Infinite finding passageway "towards human rebirth in the literal and anguished death of Jesus," and he speaks of this even as God's "death," justifying that vocabulary on the grounds that it is "the only mythologically adequate" way to speak of these realities.<sup>183</sup> For humans the divine "death" signifies existence's becoming "expressly or implicitly 'secular'" so that the sacred must be known as "the tension of human freedom toward its secular future."<sup>184</sup>

Thus Mallard shares Altizer's vision of a divine process of incarnation to which Jesus is the key, marking the death of God and the infusion of the sacred into the secular and thereby transforming both. The death of God thus represents "the vanishing of the Infinite as the abstract, wrathful Abyss of Deity" and "the realisation of this change" in Jesus death.<sup>185</sup> The mystery is preserved both by virtue of the inaccessibility of what might be called the pre-death-of-God form of the infinite in the past, and by virtue of its ongoing, but now concretised form in the movement of the Divine Kingdom which came with Jesus "and is always coming."<sup>186</sup>

182. Ibid., pp. 334-335

183. Ibid., p. 335

184. Ibid.

185. Ibid.

186. Ibid., pp. 327, 328 and 334

Mallard, like Altizer, is clearly a Category III atheist. His summary statement is that "God has become the radically Incarnate Word, or Logos, in man's history."<sup>187</sup> Yet his definition of God as "the Infinite that stands at the limit of (man's) little structures of knowledge and understanding,"<sup>188</sup> preserves the priority which he gives to the ultimate mystery and serves as well at the beginning of that process as at our own point in it.

Thus Mallard's telling of the myth would seem to reserve something of a sense of a transcendence so important in popular theism. Indeed, this seems clear in his own description of his theology as one in which "God includes, but is more than, all 'things'" by which he "would imply the radical Incarnation of the Infinite, yet its openness towards man's future."<sup>189</sup>

#### 10. Alistair Kee

"The word 'God,'" says Alistair Kee, "must refer to a supernatural being not identical with any or all of the elements of our experience of the secular world . . . , must be in connection with our experience of the world, but must involve something more."<sup>190</sup> Further, he insists that "the 'more' must carry with it the experience of personal encounter."<sup>191</sup> Yet it is this meaning of God which Kee describes as a stumbling block to faith in Christianity precisely because many modern men are unable to believe in such a God.<sup>192</sup>

187. Ibid.

188. Ibid.

189. Ibid., pp. 327, 328 and 334

190. Kee, The Way of Transcendence, p. 29

191. Ibid.

192. Ibid., p. xix



Strictly speaking, Kee does not consider such disbelief to be, usually, atheistic in character, since it is the result of there being "nothing in their experience which might lead them to suspect that there is a God," and not the result of theological difficulties.<sup>193</sup> Thus Kee speaks for the atheism which arises from "the inability to identify at all anything in experience which could legitimately be called God."<sup>194</sup>

The significance of this situation--and Kee accepts Nietzsche's description of it as the death of God--is that a new basis must be found for human judgements and for building a meaningful life.<sup>195</sup> Kee believes that the way of life which "came to expression" in Jesus of which he is "the very incarnation," offers precisely these qualities to the atheist.<sup>196</sup> Thus he calls his atheistic Christianity "the way of transcendence," in opposition to "the way of immanence" or the instinctive way of life into which most people just naturally fall.<sup>197</sup>

Having once explained the role of Christianity without God, however, Kee proceeds to develop his thinking in a more orthodox theological vocabulary than one might expect. Thus he suggests that the word "God" be used to designate "the content of our ultimate concern"<sup>198</sup> and cryptically suggests that "theology is on to something when it affirms the infinite qualitative

193. Ibid., p. 26

194. Ibid., p. 136

195. Ibid., pp. xxvi and 225

196. Ibid., pp. 211 and 214

197. Ibid., pp. xxvii-xxviii

198. Ibid., p. 195

distinction (between time and eternity)" although "we cannot express it today in terms of the supernatural, nor I fear, the metaphysical."<sup>199</sup>

Kee admits that his use of the words "transcendence" and "immanence" may be confusing as they are usually used to designate "two aspects of the being of God," but he specifies that he uses them to describe alternative options in life, and to designate that pejoratively "worldly" as opposed to "a purely secular transcendence."<sup>200</sup> He confuses the issue again, however when he insists that "theology must not simply concern itself with man: It must not be reduced to ethics, not even a Jesus ethic."<sup>201</sup>

Kee wants theology to be able to entertain "larger issues too."<sup>202</sup> Theology which does this he calls an "escalating theology" and as such it goes beyond the discussion about immanence or transcendence to the question--"the mysterious and awesome question:" "What kind of reality is it which invites faith in transcendence and then confirms that faith?"<sup>203</sup>

Despite the elusive shadow of bigger and better things to come in Kee's development, he must be classed with Van Buren and Braun as a Category I atheist. With them he searches for new and non-theistic uses of the word "God" or understandings of the use of that word. In this process there is awareness of the elusive depths of human existence, and an unwillingness to let go of them when briefly grasped if not to actively search

199. Ibid., p. 195

200. Ibid., pp. xxvii-xxviii

201. Ibid., p. 225

202. Ibid.

203. Ibid., p. 231

them out. Yet for all its mystery, Kee finds no hint of God in that existence and asserts only a transcendence which must find meaning without him.

### Summary

In conclusion, we can point out that Van Buren, Hamilton, Kee and Braun can be seen to abandon theism and turn their attention upon the world, man and those Christian materials which are servicable to this activity. They deny God but continue to show their concern for the affirmations made by others about the reality to which the word applies or to which they claim it applies, as well as to show concern for its rehabilitated use in an atheistic context. Hamilton's evolution and complexity may confuse his categorisation here, but one clear direction of his thought firmly lodges him with the other Category I atheists.

Vahanian, Sölle, and, in a qualified sense, Weil and Bonhoeffer, represent an awareness that man's condition imposes atheism. For Vahanian and Sölle this results from a situation in culture or the zeitgeist which makes the old theism impossible. Weil sees man as ontologically incapable of possessing a God to believe in and Bonhoeffer sees man as having established conditions which make God irrelevant and provide no place for him, both agreeing therefore with Vahanian and Sölle's diagnosis but Weil for a different reason than the other three.

Altizer and Mallard reflect the dynamism of process thinking to some degree in their visions of a divine change actualising atheism metaphysically. Bonhoeffer must be willing to assert change in God also, to sustain the implications of his themes that God is making man live without him and has

himself become a suffering and impotent reality, although it is not explicit in his thought in the manner that it is in Altizer and Mallard. Also, Weil's divine movement represents a process although one pushing toward final negation rather than the ontological affirmation of the others. Finally, Hamilton's own efforts at a kenotic theology which sees God and Jesus in the world is to be located here.



## CHAPTER 2: Religion and the Secular

## Being "Christian"

Within the definitions and understandings established for this study, it is inconceivable, given the centrality of the doctrine of God in Christianity, that one could use that tradition "religiously" (our definition) without responding to that doctrine in some manner or other. Those whom we have chosen to consider in this study, responded, as we have seen, by approaching the problems which the doctrine presents and by denying that there is in the experience of variously, some, many or virtually all modern men, anything comparable to the orthodox and traditional meanings assigned to the word "God."

We could hardly continue to call them religious atheists however if the doctrine of God were the only one to which they addressed themselves and contained the only materials from the tradition which they used. Such is hardly the case, for all wander through the broad spectrum of Christian doctrines, albeit inadequately, superficially and brusquely much of the time. Some take their Christian identity for granted, such as Bonhoeffer and Sölle, only occasionally expressing a note of defence in their presentation of their thoughts and perspectives. Vahanian, who also usually appears quite sure of himself, is probably reflecting only a momentary insecurity when he insists that it is not sacrilegious to speak of the death of God.<sup>1</sup>

Some, however, speak specifically to the issue of Christian identity for the atheist, or for themselves.

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1. Vahanian, "The Future of Christianity," op. cit., p. 255

Simone Weil, for example, once said: "I do not consider myself outside the Church as a source of sacramental life, but only outside it as a social reality."<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere she wrote: "I am not a Catholic, although . . . nothing that is Catholic, nothing that is Christian, has ever seemed alien to me."<sup>3</sup>

William Hamilton speaks of the "bewilderment and fury" which meets radical theologians who have lost the God of the Christian tradition but nevertheless persist in calling themselves Christian.<sup>4</sup> He also notes that such a theologian does persist because "he has an overwhelming positive sense of being in and not out; that even in his unbelief he is somehow home and not in a far country."<sup>5</sup>

Sometimes a specific Christian belief is used to identify the thinker as Christian. Hamilton tells us that all radical theologians "are aware that some means must be found to stake out our claim to be Christians" and that "attention to Jesus" does that for him.<sup>6</sup> Altizer on the other hand, believing that "it is precisely the mediation between faith and history that lies at the center of the Christian faith," insists that "insofar as a Christian is undergoing a full encounter with history he can by no means be judged to be non-Christian."<sup>7</sup>

Altizer even goes to the trouble of defending the Nineteenth Century vision of Nietzsche, Hegel and Blake "even in its most atheistic expressions," as "a strange but radical

2. Weil, Seventy Letters, p. 172

3. Ibid., p. 105

4. Hamilton, "American Theology," op. cit., p. 6

5. Hamilton, "Thursday's Child," op. cit., p. 92

6. Hamilton, "The Shape of Radical Theology," op. cit., p. 73

7. Altizer, "Word and History," op. cit., p. 133

form of the Christian faith"<sup>8</sup>--an opinion consistent with our definitions. Also, Altizer takes the offensive on the issue, insisting that it is the proclamation of orthodox theology which "is closed to the contemporary reality of the incarnation."<sup>9</sup> To Altizer, any faith which cannot exist in history is no longer Christian.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the efforts--or lack of them--to apologise for themselves, we consider the subjects of our study to be Christians because they are religious in terms of the Christian tradition. It is Christian myths, symbols, images, vocabulary and so on which they use in their quest to arrive at an understanding of themselves and their world. Thus, both to demonstrate this further, and at the same time to show some of the wider implications of their theology, we will look at a number of related areas of Christian thought.

### Religion

It must be recognised from the outset that what "religion" means to the individual Christian atheist of this study in no single case explicitly follows the meaning which we have designated for it. The general development of thought along this line has not, indeed, cohered into a common understanding of the word among the Christian atheists either. As a result, it is important to look at the meaning of "religion" and "religious" as we find it in the subjects of the study both for the sake of clarity (to avoid confusion between their use and our own) and for the greater understanding of their positions.

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8. Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, p. 20

9. Altizer, "Creative Negation in Theology," op. cit., p. 84

10. Altizer, "Word and History," op. cit., p. 133

## 1. Weil

Simone Weil spoke of the mystical and the overt or institutional form of the Christian tradition as two separate religions "within the same organism"<sup>11</sup> indicating that her understanding of religion, whatever else it might emphasise, does not rely on those traditions one indicates by "the great religions of the world" for definition. Positively, she tells us that the promises of God concerning the performance "with desire" of rites and liturgy which are a form themselves of the "recitation of the name of the Lord," constitute religion.<sup>12</sup>

Weil is, in other words, interested in the "soteriological" properties of certain actions performed in a certain manner and where these combined reveal the virtue of "saving" their devotees, she is willing to regard them as religious (though it should be noted that Weil's concept of salvation is highly personal and will be explained later). Clearly, however, she does not intend religion to be a crutch for getting through life for she asserts that "insofar as it is a source of consolation, (religion) is a hindrance to true faith."<sup>13</sup>

The effectiveness of the soteriological properties which Weil considers to be the core of religion, varies from tradition to tradition. All religious traditions "pronounce the name of God in their particular language"<sup>14</sup> but some may be too imperfect or their native surroundings too corrupt, or, "through special circumstances" love for the religion either

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11. Weil, Letter to a Priest, p. 69

12. Weil, Waiting on God, p. 117

13. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 104

14. Weil, Waiting on God, p. 117



may never have been born or may have been killed, so that "the adoption of a foreign religion is legitimate."<sup>15</sup>

Weil's understanding of religion did not prohibit her adding the adjective "true" to the description of religious traditions. Those religions which conceive God's renunciation, voluntary distance and effacement--"his apparent absence and secret presence here below"--were those which were "true."<sup>16</sup> Here she is not referring to that validity which would relate to whether or not a soteriological property were present in them, but to the correctness of their portrayal of God. Implicitly, this is but another way in which Weil shows that she conceives no necessary connection between salvation and one's position on the issue of God. However ineffective and untrue the religion one uses, if it serves as a ladder to "the highest realms of spirituality," it is natural that it will be loved.<sup>17</sup>

Weil believed that identifiable in the great religious traditions of the past was "one identical thought . . . expressed very precisely and with only very slight differences of modality." However, while she saw Jesus as "a perfect and consequently a divine expression of it," she felt that it had been almost destroyed throughout the Roman Empire and thus "today requires a modern and Western form of expression." This was the thought of a hidden and impotent God as against a manifest and omnipotent deity.<sup>18</sup>

15. Ibid., p. 119

16. Ibid., p. 88

17. Ibid., p. 119

18. Weil, Seventy Letters, pp. 159-161

Religion for Weil, then, has to do with man and God, and thus is atheistic in her sense of being atheistic, when it is most valid or true. This matter of validity and verity however would seem to imply that religion could display the full spectrum of variations in this regard, as well as the possibility of one person's individual actualisation of that religion coming higher or lower on the scale than the religion as a whole.

## 2. Bonhoeffer

Dietrich Bonhoeffer contrasts "religiosity" which seeks "the power of God in the world" at times of human distress, with a worldly interpretation of Christianity which directs man to a "powerless and suffering" God by contrast. He thus sees other religions representative of the former approach and only Christianity pointing toward the latter. A Christian suffers with God and "that is what distinguishes him from the heathen," Bonhoeffer insists.<sup>19</sup>

Bonhoeffer would seem to be saying that religion has to do with a God who by his power and domination, steps in and corrects, alters or directs things when they have gone wrong and man is in distress. This parallels Simone Weil's own insistence that religion should not offer consolation. Both reject religion as offering a Deus ex machina. In Bonhoeffer's thought here, Christianity when it is rightly itself is thus not religious but worldly.<sup>20</sup> Simone Weil does not reject religion, on the other hand, but would regard what Bonhoeffer

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19. Bonhoeffer, op. cit., p. 122

20. Ibid.

considers worldly and not like religion, as a form--in fact by her estimation the correct form--of religion which, whether good religion or bad is still religion.

Bonhoeffer also discusses the religious act which he believed was "always something partial" whereas "faith is always something whole, an act involving the whole life," and consistent with this he sees Jesus as calling men not to a religion but to a new life.<sup>21</sup> It is especially clear here that Bonhoeffer has a very low regard for religion and that he would seem to use the word to describe the practice of periodically using materials or reverting to concepts connected with one of the recognised traditions about God which offer him as a force to be used in avoiding distress and bringing about an intelligible, secure and pleasant world. At one point Bonhoeffer speaks of stages in the religiousness of man and the danger in the challenge to man's autonomy of substituting one such stage for Christ himself.<sup>22</sup> Clearly Christ's present will and man's autonomy have progressed beyond all past forms of religiousness and, taking Bonhoeffer's over-all view, beyond even religiousness.

At any rate, Bonhoeffer felt that Christianity had little to do with religion. To be Christian is to be a man--not a homo religiosus, he declared, and by this implied an acceptance of and participation in the world which religiousness precluded.<sup>23</sup> To Bonhoeffer, religion was metaphysical and

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21. Ibid., pp. 123-124

22. Ibid., p. 108

23. Ibid., pp. 123-124

individualistic while Christianity has rested upon the "religious premise" and "has always been a pattern--perhaps a true pattern--of religion,"<sup>24</sup> but he felt that it was "more or less the case already" that man had reached "the stage of being radically without religion."<sup>25</sup> He was not sure what all the implications of this would be for Christianity but he was sure Christianity was not to be identified by religion--it could be religionless.

Despite this dominant anti-religious theme, Bonhoeffer twice suggests that there may be a place for the preservation of a "secret discipline" which would preserve from profanation "the mysteries of the Christian faith." Such a secret discipline he suggests would reflect "degrees of perception and degrees of significance" or "the distinction . . . between the penultimate and ultimate." This begs identification with Bonhoeffer's concept of participating in the suffering of God by living fully in the world as it suggests a distinction between those who understand that meaning of life and those --still Christian but not religious--who have become oblivious to it in an irreligious world even though they themselves may actualise it.<sup>26</sup>

### 3. Vahanian

Vahanian distinguishes between man's natural anti-theism or idolatry and the phenomenon of religion. Thus he states: "Whether he be religious or not, man always tends toward idolatry."<sup>27</sup> He thus concedes a non-religious idolatry but

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24. Ibid., p. 94

25. Ibid., p. 91

26. Ibid., pp. 92 and 95

27. Vahanian, No Other God, p. 23



also speaks of religion's own idolatrous character or tendency.<sup>28</sup> Especially with the death of God, Vahanian believes religion is more conducive to religiosity than to true religiousness.

Christianity in this situation, must either "overcome its present cultural estrangement" and thereby become truly religious, or "become an esoteric mystery cult"<sup>29</sup> and thus only a form of religiosity. If it becomes the latter he foresees its becoming increasingly a private religion either on an individual basis, or collective but spiritually segregated basis, "in the suburbs of life."<sup>30</sup> However, Vahanian himself hopes that the Christian church will become "the avant-garde of society" and "the axis of culture" thus assuming the role properly played by religion which would represent its success in overcoming that cultural estrangement.<sup>31</sup>

Our contemporary idolatrous religiosity "would preserve of its heritage only its cultural aspects," Vahanian says, which is why he considers the problem of God "the primary problem of theology."<sup>32</sup> Western religiosity in this present state appears as "the paraphernalia of faith in God,"<sup>33</sup> and is seen as gratifying a "sublimated loneliness" by means of "a substitute sense of community, a counterfeit communion."<sup>34</sup> In this state our interest in religion is merely gossip and irresponsible.<sup>35</sup>

28. Ibid., p. 47

29. Ibid., p. 32

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., p. 99

32. Ibid., p. xii

33. Vahanian, "Beyond the Death of God," op. cit., p. 78

34. Vahanian, The Death of God, pp. 4-5

35. Ibid., p. 3

Thus Vahanian distinguishes between religiosity and religiousness--the latter having to do with man's attempt to be faithful to God, but characterised by a natural inclination to deteriorate into mere religiosity, which is idolatrous. Methodological atheism, he implies, will best serve religion during an era of the death of God.

#### 4. Van Buren

Van Buren speaks primarily of religious discourse rather than of the phenomenon of religion and in this context concerns himself with the linguistic behavior and efforts of those who call themselves Christian. Such men use the word "God," thus situating themselves in a certain way and saying something "about the sort of world to which one is related."<sup>36</sup> That men use the kind of religious discourse which Van Buren calls speaking at the edges of language is, however, a necessary but not a sufficient criterion of religion.<sup>37</sup>

"Religions are similar," Van Buren points out, "in that they share the feature of language stretched to its limits."<sup>38</sup> Their dissimilarity he sees in their pushing "the borders of language . . . out to the point of near paradox, near nonsense, and silence," as, for example, at the point of talk about "the balance of nature," "the self," "a piece of human history" or "talk about law or order."<sup>39</sup> Ultimately however, the issue raised by religion is that of choosing between "residing exclusively in language's central plains, and exploring out to

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36. Van Buren, The Edges of Language, pp. 69-70

37. Ibid., p. 115

38. Ibid., p. 117

39. Ibid.

some of its frontiers."<sup>40</sup> Religious discourse as such is primarily "moral discourse stretched almost beyond recognition."<sup>41</sup>

With regard to the word "religion" itself he states that it is used "for such a diverse family of cases that no single definition, much less one analysis can hope to cover them all."<sup>42</sup> Preventing positivism he cites as one of the aims of religion, however,<sup>43</sup> and morality and metaphysics he declares are related to but ultimately distinct from religion.<sup>44</sup> Given this relationship to metaphysics and an anti-positivism in its structure, he further believes that the dissolution of the absolute means that religion must be much more guarded in its speaking.<sup>45</sup>

Van Buren attempted to avoid religion in its anti-secular character in The Secular Meaning of the Gospel,<sup>46</sup> speaking of the Gospel as "found in the areas of the historical and ethical, not in the metaphysical or the religious."<sup>47</sup> However, since that work he has treated it as something of a sub-category within the broad secular scene, and not as the opposite of the secular.

Ultimately, Van Buren portrays religion as proposing "a way of looking at everything we have been looking at already."<sup>48</sup> Specifically it "gives nature a shape" and "arranges history."<sup>49</sup>

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40. Ibid., p. 168

41. Ibid., p. 156

42. Ibid., p. 1

43. Ibid., p. 161

44. Ibid., p. 166

45. Van Buren, Theological Explorations, pp. 41-42

46. Van Buren, The Secular Meaning of the Gospel, pp. 17-18

47. Ibid., p. 197

48. Van Buren, The Edges of Language, p. 41

49. Ibid.

Even when it cannot "provide answers to all life's questions, it remains an important source of insight into life's problems and possibilities."<sup>50</sup>

While Van Buren would not seem to see any necessary connection between the word "God" and religion, it would perhaps be fair to say that he would expect religious people to make use of the word. Religion itself is a matter of a style of mental life and attitude toward expressing how one understands life and exists in it. It seems to be a certain predisposition toward life for which Van Buren has high regard and not something for which secular man need apologise.

### 5. Hamilton

William Hamilton at one point makes the denial that man's place during a time of "waiting for God" is before the altar,<sup>51</sup> and he speaks of the radical theologian's alienation from church and the Bible, writing systematic theology and reading theology in general.<sup>52</sup> Likewise he does not see how the radical theologian can take prayer, ordination or the sacraments seriously.<sup>53</sup> Instead Hamilton suggests that we work out "a new way for men to be Christians in the kind of world we live in today."<sup>54</sup> Theologically he speaks of having only "a collection of fragments or images not too precisely related to each other, indirectly rather than directly put forth."<sup>55</sup>

50. Ibid., p. 8

51. Hamilton, "The Death of God Theologies Today," op. cit., pp. 41-48

52. Hamilton, "Thursday's Child," op. cit., pp. 88-89

53. Hamilton, "American Theology," op. cit., p. 7

54. Hamilton, "The Shape of Radical Theology," op. cit., p. 76

55. Hamilton, The New Essence of Christianity, p. 13



These attitudes being considered, it is not surprising that he suggests "the necessity of rebellion against religion and the church."<sup>56</sup> Ultimately for Hamilton, the radical Protestant is moving "away from God and religion," and "into, for, toward the world, worldly life, and the neighbor as the bearer of the worldly Jesus."<sup>57</sup>

When Hamilton defines religion, it is "as the assumption . . . that man needs God and that there are certain things that God alone can do for him;" or put otherwise, religion is "any system of thought or action in which God or the gods serve as fulfiller of needs or solver of problems."<sup>58</sup> He denies that it is thus necessary and insists that such an opinion is part of the Protestant move from the Church to the world, admitting to a heavy reliance on Bonhoeffer for help in getting to "a truly theological understanding of the problem of religionlessness."<sup>59</sup>

This getting freed from religion is, for Hamilton, "post-Oedipal, Orestean theology," and he defines Orestean theology as "the end of faith's preoccupation with inner conflict, of the struggle of faith, of the escape from the enemy God, of the careful confession of sin."<sup>60</sup> His definition of the Church as "present wherever Christ is being formed among men in the world,"<sup>61</sup> is to no small extent his alternative to religion as characterised by orthodox theology and the institutional church.

56. Ibid., p. 135

57. Hamilton, "The Death of God Theologies Today," op. cit., p. 37

58. Ibid., p. 40

59. Ibid.

60. Ibid., pp. 43-44

61. Hamilton, "Thursday's Child," op. cit., p. 91

Hamilton, therefore, is anti-religious in the fullest sense we have yet encountered. Religion represents to him activities and values opposed to the move toward full identification with the world. Clearly, he thinks of it primarily as an outgrowth of Christianity which is now obsolete and a threat to the future Christian forms.

## 6. Altizer

Altizer has defined religion as "a quest for the primordial beginning, a backward movement to an original paradise or a sacred 'center.'"<sup>62</sup> It is religious meaning of this order which he now feels faith is called upon to negate,<sup>63</sup> and to challenge.<sup>64</sup> Such faith is "conceived of as being directed against 'religion,' against piety, against the interior religious life of the church itself."<sup>65</sup> Pure religion is guilty because it "knows the sacred as an original, an immobile, and an impassive reality," while for Christians reality "is a dynamic, a living, and a forward moving process."<sup>66</sup> Religion, Altizer warns, "must necessarily direct itself against a selfhood, a history, or a cosmos existing immediately and autonomously as its own creation or ground."<sup>67</sup>

Religion then is the contrary of the secular reality Altizer theologises. Thus it is not surprising that he is certain that the church cannot survive the triumph of worldliness--that is, the death of God--in its traditional form.<sup>68</sup>

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62. Altizer, "The Sacred and the Profane," op. cit., p. 143

63. Altizer, "America and the Future of Theology," Radical Theology, Altizer and Hamilton (editors), p. 13

64. Altizer, Mircea Eliade, p. 14

65. Ibid.

66. Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, p. 40

67. Ibid., p. 34

68. Altizer, "Word and History," op. cit., p. 127

Also, he names the identification of Christ's body with the Church "from the point of view of radical Christianity," as "the original heresy."<sup>69</sup> Altizer's on-going religious reality is the Word "that is present upon the horizon of faith," to which theology is "a thinking response . . . and thus it is neither a systematization or a mythical vision nor a metaphysical or mystical system."<sup>70</sup>

Christianity does not suffer the judgement or fate of religion in Altizer's thought just as it does not in Bonhoeffer's. Altizer cannot accept that this is a post-Christian age, for the Christian cannot "dissociate the reality of his own time from the presence of Christ."<sup>71</sup> To do so affirms "the traditional forms of faith (and) becomes a Gnostic escape from the brute realities of history" because God's presence is gone and the images of Creator and creation are ones to which the radical Christian cannot respond.<sup>72</sup>

One of the specific forms of religion which Altizer has consistently condemned, even in his first work, is the non-dialectical dualism of Gnosticism which isolates flesh from spirit, light from darkness, sin from grace and the sacred from the profane.<sup>73</sup> This he says, is "to embark upon a path which must inevitably lead to a disintegration of every act of faith."<sup>74</sup>

69. Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, p. 132

70. Altizer, "Word and History," op. cit., p. 122

71. Ibid., p. 136

72. Altizer, "Theology and the Death of God," Radical Theology, Altizer and Hamilton (editors), p. 95

73. Altizer, "Word and History," op. cit., p. 124

74. Ibid.

Altizer's treatment of Gnosticism reveals two different uses which he makes of the word "religion." First he speaks of religion which negates and reverses the profane in contrast to a Gnosticism which isolates it from the sacred,<sup>75</sup> but secondly, he also declares Gnosticism to be "the religious danger of our time."<sup>76</sup> In the latter "religious" stands for that general "religion" which is opposed to Altizer's kind of radical world-affirming vision; in the former it is used specifically of religion which is backward moving, attempting to return to a primordial sacred in the primordial time.

Altizer then, associates religion with the desire to escape the present existence and seek the vision of some other kind of place to which man might belong. It denigrates the reality which man has in favor of a hypothetical reality which he does not have. Obviously Altizer can only reject all religion as world-negating, for by definition he makes it such.

#### 7. Others

Dorothee Sölle feels that religion has to do with "the longing for meaning and purpose in life, the longing for personal identity and for the kingdom of identity;" and she believes that this cannot be satisfied by society.<sup>77</sup> Thus religion must at least partially transcend society and Sölle would appear to approve of it as she considers her own theology a contribution to that need.

Recognising that religion has various forms, however, Sölle notes that while older forms of religious experience than

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75. Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, p. 77

76. Altizer, "America and the Future of Theology," op. cit., p. 19

77. Sölle, op. cit., p. 132



the present day death of God continue "tenaciously both within and outside the church," they can be expected to diminish in power and influence "the more man's social and natural ills are eliminated."<sup>78</sup> Thus the experience of the death of God does not make religion based on other forms of experience superfluous but does render them "merely the survival of something man no longer needs."<sup>79</sup>

While Herbert Braun does not speak directly to the question of religion, he does speak of discovering anew from the New Testament "a definite type of relation with one's fellow man" which would be "God" as he suggests the word be used.<sup>80</sup> This would seem to allow for many of the functions we associate with religion: Biblical study, teaching, reflection, ethical endeavor. We cannot therefore assume that he possesses a categorical disapproval of it nor understands it in another manner significantly different from this.

Mallard recognises that religion can be a force which perpetrates "weird distortions" and he thus calls the Church "to be simply and courageously human." Although he speaks of the Church's worship and sacraments he seems not to think of them--when they are what he understands they should be--as specifically religious and defines the Church itself as occurring "whenever men, in full awareness of their real or potential danger to one another, nevertheless relate themselves in the wisdom of faith." Activities specific to that Church, he suggests, are valid if they "dramatise her secular existence"

78. Ibid., pp. 141-142

79. Ibid.

80. Braun, op. cit., p. 215

and signify the acceptance "of the conditions of life and death that are given us."<sup>81</sup>

A sharing of the rejection of religion as an anti-worldly structure would seem then to underlie Mallard as well as Altizer, with almost identical character, except that Mallard is clearly trying to establish a wholly new interpretation of Christian living. Thus while religion seems to be recognised as a highly dangerous form from the past which can militate against the crucial affirmation of life and the world, it also has a potential proper form quite the opposite of that improper one.

Alastair Kee tells us that religion has to do with "God" and "God" has to do with a transcendence which is experienced as "a personal encounter," thus if one does not believe in a personal God, one is not religious.<sup>82</sup> Yet, somewhat paradoxically he speaks of a "new interest in religion" which "is not a revival in theistic belief" but in the use of techniques developed by religion for the exploration of the unknown depths of one's own nature.<sup>83</sup>

Kee also speaks of the fact that with the loss of Christianity as a religion not only is there the loss of a supernatural being, but a "loss also of every moral landmark and every aesthetic point of reference."<sup>84</sup> Thus he would preserve all but the supernatural being and thus transform Christianity from a religion to a "faith."<sup>85</sup> Religion in his

81. Mallard, op. cit., pp. 340-341

82. Kee, op. cit., pp. 29-30

83. Ibid., pp. 220-221

84. Ibid., p. 117

85. Ibid., p. 34

thought is thus clearly as undesirable as the supernatural being who is the critical aspect which makes it religion. Other aspects of religion may be of value and can be detached from it without bringing their "religious" characteristic with them.

#### Summary: Religion

We may say in conclusion then that Altizer and Kee are the most unequivocal in their antagonism to religion. Bonhoeffer deviates from this with his allowance for an informed and conserving remnant; Hamilton deviates with his concept of the Church as being wherever Christ is being formed among men in the world (which seems to be a perpetuation of a religious reality thus formulated); and Mallard deviates with his own concept of the church as men's inter-relation in faith despite knowledge of the dangers. Braun's theology must be considered a variation on a concept much like these latter two despite his failure to be specific here.

Van Buren, as we saw, came to an understanding of religion which made it valuable and important. Similarly, Vahanian and Sölle recognise that religion may be good or bad, relevant or irrelevant to society; and Weil recognises that it may vary according to its validity; but all of these latter three also accept and affirm a certain kind of religion.

Regarding what religion is about only Weil and Kee link it specifically to God, and although this idea occurs in Hamilton it is not a major theme there. Despite their agreement on this matter, Weil and Kee take diametrically opposed views as to the resultant religion's desirability. Bonhoeffer, Hamilton, Altizer and Mallard accept the traditional form of religion as

man's attempt to escape his real world. Vahanian, Van Buren, Sölle and Braun affirm its possible contribution to human life, primarily because of the understanding of that life which it offers.

### The Secular

Weil is unique among our subjects in her antipathy to the sort of attitudes which lead to an enthusiastic secularism and thus it is not surprising to find her blaming "secularisation and humanism" as the causes of Christianity without the supernatural and, in turn, asserting that such a Christianity can only cause "the errors of our time."<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless it should be noted that her personal life shows deep involvement in areas which would generally be recognised as secular--as, for example the hardships of the labouring class--and her religious vision requires such attention for the world one encounters.

Bonhoeffer's "religionless Christianity" built on man's autonomy and the world's godlessness is precisely what later theologians will designate as "secular Christianity." His general rejection of religion coupled with his affirmation of this world and his denial of a deliverance from death, argue for the belief that he should pose the secular opposite to the religions in a dialectical structure, aligning himself with the first against the second. For him it is the words "worldliness" and "religionless" which bear the meanings usually assigned to the word "secular."<sup>87</sup>

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86. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 104

87. Bonhoeffer, op. cit., pp. 125, 109, 120



A basic distinction between secularity and secularism is insisted upon by Vahanian who gives considerable attention to this area. The former he believes is demanded of faith for it "is the realm in which religion can show its relevance" while the latter, secularism, "is a form of religiosity for which the present and immanent are invested with the attributes of the eternal and transcendent."<sup>88</sup> Thus secularity is "the only religious mode of being" but it is characterised by the attitude of living "tanquam in aliena" ("as in a foreign land," Hebrews 11:9)--an attitude which is exactly the opposite of that which characterises secularism.<sup>89</sup>

Vahanian's development does not deny an authentic worldliness which faith realises for the world by desacralising the world or dedivinising nature.<sup>90</sup> Such worldliness must always in Vahanian's thought, however, be realised to be wholly other than the transcendent creator and thus, while authentic, and perhaps epistemologically autonomous, it is not ontologically autonomous. Therefore, when he calls for the consecration of the world by culture<sup>91</sup> he is seeking to avoid secularism while desacralisation of the world seeks to avoid pantheism. The mean toward which the two processes move is secularity.

One must not suppose that Vahanian's "secularism" is the opposite of either religiousness or religiosity, for he denies that true non-religion can be "an empirical datum of the sociological or historical order," relegating it as a

88. Vahanian, The Death of God, p. 67

89. Vahanian, No Other God, pp. 8 and 18

90. Ibid., p. 8

91. Vahanian, "Beyond the Death of God," op. cit., p. 11

possibility only to the eschaton.<sup>92</sup> Thus we must assume that a society can display religiosity and secularism at the same time--and indeed it is precisely this combination which he sees in our current cultural phenomenon of the death of God which "marks the birth of secularism as a vector of the new religiosity."<sup>93</sup>

In The Secular Meaning of the Gospel, Van Buren tends to treat secular and religious as opposites as we have noted, preferring the secular and condemning the religious.<sup>94</sup> This changes however as he comes to recognise a valid religiousness. Nevertheless, the definition of secularity in the first work as "certain empirical attitudes," "interest in questions of human life this side of the beyond," and "a lack of interest in what were once felt to be great metaphysical questions,"<sup>95</sup> does not necessarily shift. Thus even later we find Van Buren using the word "secular" to denote "this-worldly experience and conceptions."<sup>96</sup>

Van Buren also recognises a pejorative use of the word "secular," however, which designates men's impatience with any questions except "those which admit of clear answers," and which thus views man "as the problem solver, not the problem poser,"<sup>97</sup> --a view which he finds clearly inadequate. Secularism is also taken by Van Buren as "a loose designation of a reaction to the idealism of the last century,"<sup>98</sup> and as "the features of transience, plurality, relativity and autonomous human

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92. Vahanian, No Other God, p. 32

93. Ibid., p. xi

94. Van Buren, The Secular Meaning of the Gospel, pp. 17-18

95. Ibid., pp. xiii-xiv

96. Van Buren, Theological Explorations, p. 164

97. Ibid., p. 7

98. Van Buren, The Secular Meaning of the Gospel, pp. xiii-xiv

responsibility that mark contemporary Western culture."<sup>99</sup> The latter characteristics may apply as well to the Christian as anyone, Van Buren insists.<sup>100</sup> Thus, while early Van Buren might be inclined to say one is either secular or religious, later Van Buren would be more likely to think of men who were secular qualified by a religious aspect, and men who were simply secular.

William Hamilton follows Bonhoeffer in speaking of worldliness and religionlessness and in affirming this as meaningful and proper for modern man. Thus he speaks of "a movement away from God and religion," but more importantly, the movement "into, for, toward the world, worldly life, and the neighbor as the bearer of the worldly Jesus."<sup>101</sup> In Hamilton therefore, secularity is the opposite of religion--"man's arrogant grasping for God," and is clearly at one with the autonomous and worldly man he saw Bonhoeffer describing and affirming.<sup>102</sup> Secular man in this context could not, by definition, be either a theist or one deeply engrossed in a search for God, yet he could be Christian by virtue of the nature of his worldly life.

The secular and the religious dichotomy does not so much apply to Altizer whose tendency is always to speak of essentially the same distinction in terms of the sacred and the profane. These two concepts represent aspects of our reality which are in the process of becoming one as the sacred moves

99. Van Buren, The Edges of Language, p. 168

100. Van Buren, The Secular Meaning of the Gospel, pp. xiii-xiv, and 81

101. Hamilton, "The Death of God Theologies Today," op. cit., p. 37

102. Ibid., p. 40

"more and more fully into the body of the profane."<sup>103</sup> While in the past these represented two existential choices, Altizer forsees "a reconciliation of the sacred with the profane, an ultimate dialectical synthesis."<sup>104</sup> The reconciliation however, is more properly seen as "the ever more fully dawning power of the reality of the profane" so that the Christian "must finally look forward to the resurrection of the profane in a transfigured and thus finally sacred form."<sup>105</sup>

Altizer's vision is unquestionably world-affirming as is Bonhoeffer's and Hamilton's but unlike theirs he attempts, by dialectical means, to bring the sacred into the dawning worldliness. Even from his first book--from which he later differs critically in other respects--his aim to identify the sacred from which man has become alienated, does not change. Thus if, ultimately, "the world is to be found here and nowhere else,"<sup>106</sup> it is not without the sacred which has become incarnate in it.<sup>107</sup>

From the point of view of the issue of the secular, Sölle's theological development appears in some ways closer to orthodoxy than the others, for her entire development serves the purpose of preserving a place for God in this time of his "death" and explaining the advantages of his temporary representation as weak and suffering. No explicit adjustment appears to be made in the theology of man or his world and no radical re-evaluation of the secular is undertaken by her.

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103. Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, p. 109

104. Altizer, Mircea Eliade, p. 103

105. Altizer, "The Sacred and the Profane," op. cit., p. 155

106. Altizer, "Word and History," op. cit., p. 126

107. Altizer, Mircea Eliade, p. 18



Christology and the doctrine of God are the explicit content of her concern in Christ the Representative.

Nevertheless, there are implicit echos of far-reaching effects in Sölle's insistence that other religious experiences than those of God's death and representation as weak and suffering are no longer necessary.<sup>108</sup> It means that man's autonomy is at least temporarily allowed and accepted and that man's natural capacity for belief (or lack of it) suggests a format for the gospel presented to him. Thus, like Vahanian she admits an epistemological autonomy even if ultimately in some presently unknowable way there is no ontological autonomy.

Herbert Braun's article suggests that he too accepts the mind and views of modern men with their inability to believe in God or understand at all many of the New Testament affirmations. Such a stance must be taken as "secular" although, as in Van Buren's thought, by no means disallowing such religious life as we have already indicated.

Again, Mallard develops a theme almost exactly like Altizer's. For him too, secular existence is the context "in which the issues of faith are realised."<sup>109</sup> Ever since "the world and its 'other' . . . met in a dialectical coincidence,"<sup>110</sup> this has been so. Thus "with the Divine 'death,' existence became either expressly or implicitly 'secular' knowing the 'sacred' as now specifically the tension of human freedom toward its secular future."<sup>111</sup> The result is the secularisation

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108. Sölle, op. cit., pp. 141-142

109. Mallard, op. cit., p. 340

110. Ibid., p. 328

111. Ibid., p. 335

"of all actual abstraction."<sup>112</sup> In neither Mallard nor Altizer therefore is the sacred cast off or rejected. Rather it is integrated into man's continuing, but now a newly formed and consecrated, secular reality.

Kee accepts the concept of "secular" Christianity also, with Bonhoeffer and Hamilton, and with the correlated theme of the abandonment of its religious overtones and form.<sup>113</sup> Again, as religion is bound up with a personal God, secularity is specifically atheistic.<sup>114</sup>

#### Summary: The Secular

We thus get a pattern of Van Buren and Braun providing for something "religious" existing naturally within the over-all "secularity" of modern men and, largely because atheistic, in no way hostile to their frame of mind. Bonhoeffer, Hamilton, Altizer, Kee and Mallard opt for a Christianity more clearly characterised by its secular form than any religious form of the past. Vahanian and Sölle still recognise Christianity as having to do with religion--properly-- while granting a validity to secular aspects of modern man. Weil alone defends a religion opposed to a secular.

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112. Ibid.

113. Kee, op. cit., p. 189

114. Ibid., p. ix

## CHAPTER 3: Jesus

## 1. Simone Weil

Simone Weil tells us that she "never wondered whether Jesus was or was not the incarnation of God; but in fact . . . was incapable of thinking of him without thinking of him as God."<sup>1</sup> Yet Jesus' crucifixion always seems to be, in her thought, much more a cosmic image than an historical fact, and the role of that image is a facet of the Divine. Insofar as it is an event, the crucifixion represents an abandonment characterised on the part of both God and Jesus as "an abyss of love," so that Weil is inspired to say: "There we have the real proof that Christianity is something divine."<sup>2</sup>

As the crucified one, Jesus presents a link between the awesome Creator and creation relationship under which we ourselves stand, and the mysterious Father and Son relationship which constitutes the whole of a dynamic divinity.<sup>3</sup> The resurrection would destroy this link, but "those who have the immense privilege of participating with their whole being in the Cross of Christ," may pass to the latter pair (i.e. Father/Son as opposed to Creator/creation) and thus into "the secrets of God Himself."<sup>4</sup>

Thus Weil's crucified Jesus performs a crucial function for man but is as well essential to the wholeness of divinity, for he is, put otherwise, one end of the "infinite distance

1. Weil, Waiting on God, p. 22

2. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 79

3. Weil, Intimations of Christianity, pp. 195-196

4. Ibid.

between God and God"--the furthestmost point from God the Father.<sup>5</sup> As the "infinite distance" between the two points is also "the totality of space and time" and as we are "a tiny segment of this line,"<sup>6</sup> this vision could be designated as panentheistic. This distance is however, a tearing of God, and thus a cosmic and truly divine crucifixion.<sup>7</sup> Christ is God in the self-crucifixion known as creation by which he goes to the infinite distance and furthestmost point of his divine self-love, thereby also containing--and in fact, constituting--"creation."<sup>8</sup>

## 2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Bonhoeffer came to believe that "the key to everything is the 'in him,'" and thus "all that we rightly expect from God and pray for is to be found in Jesus Christ." The difficulty arises however in that "the God of Jesus Christ has nothing to do with all that we, in our human way, think he can and ought to do." In order to arrive at the God of Jesus Christ, therefore, "we must persevere in quiet meditation on the life, sayings, deeds, sufferings and death of Jesus."<sup>9</sup>

Yet in his thinking about man's new autonomy, Bonhoeffer faces the problem that man does not expect anything from God, thus has no place for him and the problem becomes that of reclaiming the world now come of age for Christ.<sup>10</sup> Thus there are two problems raised by the reality of Christ: How

5. Weil, Waiting on God, p. 68

6. Weil, Intimations of Christianity, p. 197

7. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 81

8. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 28; Waiting on God, p. 68

9. Bonhoeffer, op. cit., p. 130

10. Ibid., p. 115



autonomous and non-religious man might encounter Christ, and when he is encountered, how to see in him the true God and the valid expectations of that God which man might have.

Bonhoeffer's development around these themes is<sup>so</sup> sufficiently incomplete that one has to follow him through many unexpressed connections. Yet it seems clear that he saw Christ's significance in offering a way to participate "in the suffering of God in Christ."<sup>11</sup> Thus Jesus does not offer "a last refuge in the eternal"<sup>12</sup> but a challenge to "watch with me one hour"--to position oneself "with God in his suffering."<sup>13</sup>

In such a theology Bonhoeffer's Christ, not unlike Weil's, actualises the divine suffering, incarnates it and demonstrates it, while autonomous man's lack of need for God is thereby made irrelevant by virtue of the fact that a weak and suffering God does not do anything for man but in Christ does create a way of life for man which participates in that suffering.

### 3. Gabriel Vahanian

Vahanian insists that "the Trinity . . . was no shortcut to God through the deification of the man Jesus--much less was it, therefore, a shortcut to Jesus," and this, he adds, "amounts to saying that one cannot talk about Jesus without first talking about God."<sup>14</sup> This is the opposite of Bonhoeffer's point that one understands God by meditation on Jesus, yet it could have been predicted, given Vahanian's belief in the

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11. Ibid., pp. 123-124

12. Ibid., p. 112

13. Ibid., p. 122

14. Vahanian, No Other God, p. 34

cultural collapse of the concept of God, for to Vahanian the death of God, "rather than liberating Jesus from mythological and supernatural fetters . . . delivers him up to historical anonymity and alienates him from us irretrievably."<sup>15</sup>

Thus Vahanian has little to say about Jesus being concerned, one must conclude, with the problem of God which precedes direct attention to Christology. He does, however, hypothesise that "the meaning of the New Testament insistence on the necessity of Jesus Christ for God's accessibility to man" is to be found in the Bible's way of speaking "of the transcendence of God almost always as though it were an 'empirical' phenomenon."<sup>16</sup> To him this connotes the truth that "the word of man is man's access to the word of God: No man can speak it, nor does any man speak who does not speak the word."<sup>17</sup> Such a truth, it should be noted, is an aspect of that epistemological autonomy which characterises man.

In this latter context, Vahanian could possibly rely on an incarnational concept of some form, but the reference is too fragmentary to detect a Christology--if indeed he even has one--in it. In speaking of the need to talk about God before talking about Jesus however, he pointed out that even talking about God could not be done "without being asserted at the same time as a man of a given situation,"<sup>18</sup> and since we are situated in the time of God's death and speak of it, one cannot see how Vahanian could find a basis from which to speak of Jesus.

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15. Ibid., p. 30

16. Ibid., p. 41

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid., p. 34

## 4. Paul Van Buren

In Van Buren's first book, The Secular Meaning of the Gospel, written at a time when he avoided speaking of God at all, he laid heavy emphasis on the belief that "questions about 'God' will receive their only useful answer in the form of the history of (Jesus)."<sup>19</sup> He credits this point to Bonhoeffer, which we have shown is appropriate, and later symbolises it through the analogy of an answer to a question about the spirit of New York which is made by "telling about the man whom we regard as the true New Yorker."<sup>20</sup> Even later when Van Buren writes directly about the word "God" and its uses, Jesus seems to fill this role of signifying the fullest potential meanings of man's life--some "whole" no other individual ever quite achieves. Thus in The Edges of Language he notes that "this man's life and death were said to have eternal and universal consequences" in contrast to "almost any historical occurrence which can be said to have consequences"--but only normal consequences.<sup>21</sup>

If throughout his later development, Van Buren continued to emphasise Jesus as a man about whom the most extensive claims could be made, it remains true that we find the fullest development of this in The Secular Meaning of the Gospel which was written before Van Buren's growing interest in the word "God" displaced it into a related, but no longer central concern. In this work, Jesus is considered "fully man and in

19. Van Buren, The Secular Meaning of the Gospel, p. 148

20. Van Buren, Theological Explorations, p. 130

21. Van Buren, The Edges of Language, p. 124

no sense 'more' than a man," but nevertheless "not to be confused with other men."<sup>22</sup> His uniqueness is seen by Van Buren in the fact of his being "the one man who truly existed for others" and who was called "to be the one for the many whereas the calling of all other men is to let him be that for them: The way, the truth and the life."<sup>23</sup> Also, Van Buren notes that Jesus was obedient to this calling whereas others are not obedient to their own, which constitutes a further form of his uniqueness.<sup>24</sup>

This "existing for others" was described by the word "freedom" and specifically, freedom "from anxiety, and the need to establish his own identity" and "above all (freedom) for his neighbor."<sup>25</sup> Van Buren believed that this word best "summed up the characteristics of Jesus" and unlike other words such as "faith," "does not lead us so easily onto the slippery ground of the nonempirical."<sup>26</sup> Despite this latter sober concern, Van Buren attempts to relate "the language of the Gospel" with its "exclusive claims" and "universal aspect," to his view of Jesus.<sup>27</sup>

Easter becomes the decisive event in the search for the secular meaning of the Gospel which Van Buren undertook. For the disciples it was a "discernment situation" in which Jesus' freedom "became contagious" or, put otherwise, it became the occasion of their suddenly realising fully the significance of Jesus' life and death and, as a result of that realisation, of

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22. Van Buren, The Secular Meaning of the Gospel, p. 54

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid., p. 123

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., p. 139



gaining themselves something of that freedom which Jesus had shown."<sup>28</sup> It was this post-mortem event in the lives of the disciples which guaranteed that "the story of Jesus could not be told simply as the story of a free man who died," and resulted in its becoming "the story of the free man who had set them free."<sup>29</sup>

"After the fact" the disciples saw Jesus' whole life and his death as indicative of his freedom and naturally spoke of his death "which was the consequence of his freedom to be related to men . . . as death 'for us.'"<sup>30</sup> Also Van Buren sees the nativity stories as representative of "the language of thanksgiving, awe and joy over the fact of the coming into being of this man," but as in no sense factual--an interpretation which, he suggests, would "threaten the doctrine of the full manhood of Jesus."<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless Van Buren allows that speaking of Jesus life as a free man is the context for the doctrine of his "human nature" even as speaking of his "contagious freedom" and of "discernment situations" is the context for speaking of the doctrine of his "divine nature."<sup>32</sup>

#### 5. William Hamilton

William Hamilton, like Van Buren, in his early stage, turns to Jesus in place of an empty theism. Thus in The New Essence of Christianity he portrays Jesus as "true man, man as he ought to be,"<sup>33</sup> while also, like Bonhoeffer and Van Buren,

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28. Ibid., p. 134

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid., p. 151

31. Ibid., p. 156

32. Ibid., p. 168

33. Hamilton, The New Essence of Christianity, p. 115

he concedes only a "God as known in Jesus the Lord,"<sup>34</sup> insisting that "if there is divinity apart from Jesus it is a form of divinity that Jesus as suffering Lord corrects, destroys, transforms."<sup>35</sup> While Van Buren would speak of Jesus' divinity in terms of his unique and continuing effect on man (i.e. discernment situations and contagious freedom), Hamilton would speak of it as "God withdrawing from all claims to power and authority, and sovereignty, and consenting to become himself the victim and subject of all that the world can do."<sup>36</sup>

Hamilton therefore, sees Jesus as God's "full consent to abide in the world,"<sup>37</sup> and this is consistent with the image of Jesus as suffering Lord, an image not without the tensions of exaltation and lowliness, presence and absence.<sup>38</sup> Hamilton attempts to resolve these tensions by speaking of "two forms of Jesus' lordship over the world:" The one "a lordship of humiliation," and the other "a lordship of victory and power," the first being contemporary but the second being "a lordship that is to come, or that we are to come to."<sup>39</sup>

In later treatment of the meaning and significance of Jesus, Hamilton becomes more secular and less decisive. Thus we find him claiming "that the New Testament Jesus can in fact be known, that a figure of sufficient clarity is available to us so that discipleship to him . . . is a possible center for

34. Ibid., p. 99

35. Ibid., pp. 86-87

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid., p. 81

39. Ibid., p. 109

Christian faith and life;"<sup>40</sup> and then lamenting that "the theologian is sometimes inclined to suspect that Jesus Christ is best understood not as either the object or ground of faith, and not as person, event or community, but simply as a place to be, a standpoint."<sup>41</sup> He even attempts to develop the concept of Jesus as to be discerned "beneath the worldly masks."<sup>42</sup> At the time of this latter development he directs men not to "look for Jesus out there in scripture, tradition," but rather to "become Jesus."<sup>43</sup>

Throughout the variable ways of speaking about Jesus which Hamilton develops, however, there is a repeated theme of the neighbor and being alongside him or being for him, or finding our way to him.<sup>44</sup> This ethical emphasis in Hamilton's most secular moments seems somehow to crystallise something of what Jesus means to him with, or without God, but it is not feasible to construct a Christology or even a clear and full "Jesusology" from these fragments.

Still, frustrating as it may be (much like his inability to settle finally into a single clear atheism<sup>45</sup>) Hamilton insists on the importance of Jesus at one moment as the means by which he stakes out his claim to be Christian;<sup>46</sup> at another "because there is something there . . . that I do not find elsewhere;"<sup>47</sup> and at another because "our way to our neighbor

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40. Hamilton, "The Shape of Radical Theology," op. cit., pp. 73-74

41. Hamilton, "Thursday's Child," op. cit., p. 92

42. Hamilton, "The Death of God Theologies Today," op. cit., p. 50

43. Ibid.

44. Hamilton, "Thursday's Child," op. cit., p. 92; "The Death of God Theologies Today," op. cit., pp. 41-42

45. Hamilton, "The Death of God Theologies Today," op. cit., p. 48 (for example)

46. Hamilton, "The Shape of Radical Theology," op. cit., p. 73

47. Ibid., p. 75

. . . is mapped out . . . by Jesus Christ and his way to his neighbor."<sup>48</sup> Even when the most that he can say about Jesus is that he is "a place to be, a standpoint" he feels inclined to reach back into his more orthodox vocabulary and suggest that "this may be the meaning of Jesus' true humanity and it may even be the meaning of his divinity, and thus of divinity itself."<sup>49</sup>

The curious thing about Hamilton then, is that many clues indicate a greater and greater movement from orthodox, transcendentalist and pietistic Christianity, but throughout this his involvement with the images and possibility in the Jesus materials of Christianity remain firm. More than for any other, they are in fact therefore, the basis for our categorisation of him, even in the later stages of his work up through the mid-1960's, as "religious" according to our definition (which carries with it the adjective "Christian" by virtue of Christianity being the tradition the materials of which he uses) and simply "Christian" according to his.

#### 6. Thomas J. J. Altizer

Altizer is yet another theologian who "will admit nothing of what either the Bible or the Christian tradition has known as God apart from Jesus Christ."<sup>50</sup> In Altizer's thought this is because of the "forward movement of the incarnate word from God to Jesus, and . . . from the historical Jesus to the universal body of humanity, thereby undergoing an epiphany in

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48. Hamilton, "The Death of God Theologies Today," op. cit., p. 48

49. Hamilton, "Thursday's Child," op. cit., p. 92

50. Altizer, Toward a New Christianity, p. 12



every human hand and face."<sup>51</sup> That movement signifies the death of God--the God now identifiable with Satan--through the vehicle of Christ's crucifixion.<sup>52</sup> This "radically kenotic Christology" Altizer states was begun with Bonhoeffer<sup>53</sup> but it was William Hamilton who first introduced him to the possibility of a consistent development of it.<sup>54</sup>

Altizer's Christ is "the kenotic Christ who has finally emptied himself of Spirit in wholly becoming flesh,"<sup>55</sup> and in his new epiphany is "a Christ who has not descended from 'above,' but who is wholly and fully incarnate in our midst."<sup>56</sup> As such he "is the fullness of time and the world,"<sup>57</sup> and thus he "can never appear in a moment of lost time, nor . . . be truly present in any form of innocence."<sup>58</sup>

"Incarnational theology" is another way in which Altizer speaks of his unique vision, thereby emphasising the importance of Jesus and the event of the crucifixion.<sup>59</sup> It should be noted here however, that such theology does not center on the birth and conception events, but again on the crucifixion, for "only . . . in the death of the Word on the cross, does the Word actually and wholly become flesh,"<sup>60</sup> so that "God is Jesus" because "God has become the incarnate Word."<sup>61</sup> Incarnation then, is a process realised in the death and not the birth of Jesus.

51. Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, p. 83

52. Ibid., p. 101

53. Altizer, "Word and History," op. cit., pp. 135-136

54. Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, p. 11

55. Altizer, "Creative Negation in Theology," op. cit., pp. 83-84

56. Altizer, Mircea Eliade, p. 18

57. Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, p. 156

58. Ibid., p. 61

59. Ibid., p. 82

60. Ibid., p. 54

61. Ibid., p. 44

This theology requires the repudiation of the resurrection and ascension dogmas which would place Christ "into a celestial and transcendent realm," and in their place affirms a dogma of a descent "ever more fully into darkness and flesh."<sup>62</sup> In place of a discussion of Christ's resurrected body, Altizer sees Jesus' new form as so radically different that "to the extent that we imagine Jesus in his traditional Christian form, we are closed to his contemporary presence."<sup>63</sup> He does, however, refer to Nietzsche's Zarathustra as "the resurrected Jesus" in the same context in which he asserts that "Dionysus and Christ are one,"<sup>64</sup> thus using myth to give meaning to his new conceptualisations.

As follows this "incarnational" and "kenotic" theology, the process will lead to a point where we can no longer detect the identity of Jesus. Thus Altizer does not give much significance to the question of the present meaningfulness of Jesus. Rather he suggests that the contemporary Christian "is perhaps now losing his ability to speak the name of either 'Jesus' or 'Christ,'" but Altizer insists, "even if the Word has become unnameable it is not unspeakable, for we speak the Word when we say Yes to the moment before us."<sup>65</sup>

Still, Altizer himself is able to speak to "the uniqueness of the original event or person of Jesus," just as the process has not left him without a vision of the emptied transcendent and kenotic movement of the sacred into the profane. This he

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62. Ibid., p. 120

63. Altizer, "Word and History," op. cit., p. 125

64. Altizer, Mircea Eliade, p. 198

65. Altizer, "Creative Negation in Theology," op. cit., p. 84

says, "must in some sense lie in the fact that here and only here a sacred event deeply and decisively affects the concrete process of history, embedding itself in a particular and contingent movement in such a way as to be indissolubly identified with the actuality of its occurrence, thereby abandoning the universal or eternal form that otherwise is invariably present in sacred events."<sup>66</sup>

Thus Altizer's Jesus takes on a significance of cosmic dimensions, affecting the very form of the sacred. His own historical reality seals the reality of the death of God in historical time and likewise the reality of the incarnation of the Word, resulting in the fully incarnate body of Christ in which the Christian now lives liberated from transcendence.<sup>67</sup> Now "the names of Jesus and God are ultimately one" and God "is Jesus as the expanding or forward-moving process who is becoming 'one man.'"<sup>68</sup>

## 7. Dorothee Sölle

In Sölle's theology Christ is in every sense central, for he stands between man and God, playing the role of a representative in both directions during a time of the absence of God. This "playing God's role in the world" as his representative "is what incarnation means," she asserts.<sup>69</sup> It is, however, the role of "the God who is helpless in this world"<sup>70</sup> and requires a "doctrine of Christ's continuing representative suffering" which depends upon the centrality of the Cross

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66. Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, p. 57

67. Ibid., pp. 111-112

68. Ibid., p. 75

69. Sölle, op. cit., p. 141

70. Ibid., p. 150

rather than the resurrection as the basis of the Christian faith --the latter being regarded as "an anticipatory sign of hope" and not "God's final victory over his enemies."<sup>71</sup>

Jesus' representation is interpreted as his having "kept the future open for God,"<sup>72</sup> but this clearly eliminates "a final Christ--a replacement who perfectly and completely secures for us the reconciling grace of God."<sup>73</sup> Thus Christ's representation is temporally incomplete, provisional,<sup>74</sup> and for God "identity is still to come."<sup>75</sup> In other words, Sölle offers Christ in place of God to men existing in the time of the death of God, but not as an ultimate replacement since God is really still living. Instead it is as a representative of God, a theme which categorises Sölle with those who argue that one can understand Christ without first understanding God and be related to God through Christ.

Sölle's knowledge of God's absence does contribute to her conception of Christ as representative, however, and Christ as representative does not so much show us God (as Bonhoeffer's Christ does) as keep a place for God. In these two senses her theme varies somewhat from the others who turn to Jesus in the face of the death of God.

## 8. Herbert Braun

Herbert Braun notes that in the world of the New Testament "all the designations of dignity which the community applied to Jesus in confessions--Messiah, Son of Man, Kyrios, Soter,

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71. Ibid., p. 125

72. Ibid., p. 134

73. Ibid., p. 109

74. Ibid., p. 107

75. Ibid., p. 134



Logos--fit for the Jew at that time, as well as for the religious person in Hellenism, into a firmly outlined system of coordinates." Thus the question for them was not the validity of the titles, but the validity of their application to Jesus as opposed to other men. Such is not the case for modern men who do not accept the validity of the titles applied to any living persons. Thus, Braun says, if we attempt to answer the question "Do you hold Jesus to be the Messiah, the Kyrios," neither a yes nor a no can have "the meaning which is, on the surface, attached to it in the New Testament." Thus Jesus simply is a man, albeit one involved in the same obligations as we.<sup>76</sup>

#### 9. William Mallard

Mallard is concerned to establish the difference between "the passing features" of Jesus' ministry and "its true significance" which he believes "lies in the Kingdom of God and the truth and love that manifest the Kingdom."<sup>77</sup> Thus he saw Jesus as "a Jewish apocalyptic prophet" who "saw the world about to be transfigured into the everlasting aeon of God's manifest reign."<sup>78</sup> This event did happen "but the outward form that it assumed was unanticipated even by Jesus himself."<sup>79</sup>

That form temporally is located in Jesus' crucifixion which, by reason of his affirmation of "the meaningful continuance of struggle," reversed the movement or direction

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76. Braun, op. cit., p. 207  
 77. Mallard, op. cit., p. 326  
 78. Ibid., p. 324  
 79. Ibid., p. 334

of the dialectic of existence from one toward resolution "into the motionless Beyond," to one of the Kingdom of God's movement "into the turbulent stuff of our physical existence."<sup>80</sup> Thus at his death Jesus did not return into nothing, but rather "Nothing entered into him" and he "was carried forward universally into the selfhood of the concrete human beings that succeeded him on earth."<sup>81</sup>

Mallard therefore can view Jesus as "the Incarnate meaning of things," and his death and resurrection as the Infinite negating "its abstract, meaningless form to become the wonder of Christ-for-us in each moment of our free and decisive striving."<sup>82</sup> There is therefore a "twofold situation" in Jesus crucified: The death of God which is the movement of the kingdom negating the void and wrathful aspects of the transcendent; and thereby the actualisation of the human element by reversing its passage into Nothing and by carrying Jesus forward into that human element.<sup>83</sup>

#### 10. Alistair Kee

In Alistair Kee's thought, Jesus replaces God as the one who is personally encountered as a challenge-presenting reality to the way of life which Kee calls the way of transcendence. The Christian faith is basically the affirmation of this situation for Kee. Jesus becomes "the measure of all things,"<sup>84</sup> and "the very incarnation of the way of transcendence,"<sup>85</sup> not by virtue of time having become cosmically fulfilled but

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80. Ibid., p. 327

81. Ibid., p. 328

82. Ibid., p. 335

83. Ibid., pp. 327-328

84. Kee, op. cit., p. 143

85. Ibid., p. 211

because, "on the contrary, . . . of what came to expression when he appeared" which Kee tells us was "the whole history of revelation of transcendence" coming to fulfillment.<sup>86</sup>

Kee sees Jesus therefore as the supreme representation of the way of life and this way of life as one intended for everyone.<sup>87</sup> By the same token, he speaks not only of Jesus as "of the utmost significance" but also of the necessity that this fact be recognised if one is to be considered Christian.<sup>88</sup> Thus he affirms the traditional Christian confession that "Jesus is Lord" insofar as it "is not primarily an ascription of divinity to Jesus but a statement of intent to live the life commanded by Jesus."<sup>89</sup>

That one can point to Jesus and say "God is like that"<sup>90</sup> rather than the other way around, seems to be a concession in his formulation which Kee makes for the theists who enter into the Christian faith but it also indicates his alignment on the issue of whether or not God can be known through Jesus or Jesus must be known through God. The only crucial issue in the Christian faith which Kee accepts, however, arguing that it was the only issue "under debate so far as the early Christians were concerned," is this: "Is 'the way, the truth and the life' for men definitively revealed in Jesus Christ?"<sup>91</sup> The substance of Kee's theology is his affirmative answer to this question.

86. Ibid., p. 214

87. Ibid., p. 135

88. Ibid., p. xviii

89. Ibid., p. 141

90. Ibid., p. 211

91. Ibid., p. xx

### Summary

It is clear that, with the exception of Vahanian and Braun, Jesus represents an absolutely central symbol to the Christian atheists. In Weil, Bonhoeffer, Hamilton, Altizer and Mallard this importance represents their deepest interpretations of the meaning of human existence. But the theme of Jesus as an ethical model is strongly tapped by Van Buren, Hamilton and Kee. Braun too may recognise the New Testament Jesus as a prime example of right relations between men, but he does not emphasise it so decisively as these three. Also, it should be noted that while the ethical emphasis is less abstract than the virtually cosmological aspects of Jesus for Weil, Altizer and Mallard (and less so, for Bonhoeffer), it too bears deep theological significance.

Hamilton's early use of Jesus is predominantly ethical, it can be noted, but the later use has more in common with Altizer and Mallard. Sölle, of course, is most interested in the theological role she assigns to Jesus and is thereby closer to those concerned with what Jesus is than with what Jesus does.



## CHAPTER 4: Other Themes

## Transcendence and Immanence

Traditionally in Christian theology transcendence and immanence were used to designate two aspects of God, the one that aspect of God wholly beyond man's world and the other the aspect of God which man encounters. In contemporary thought this use has been undermined by a tendency to regard transcendent as referring to God's realm and immanent to man's. This shift in perspective is related to a reaction against Divine isolation and therefore it is not surprising to find it underlying much of the thought in Christian atheism.

Simone Weil, thinking of transcendence in the classical Western sense, recognised that the concept seemed to be contradictory in that transcendence "can be known only through contact since our faculties are unable to invent it" but that to speak of experiencing the transcendent is to qualify its transcendency.<sup>1</sup> A satisfactory definition of transcendence would thus appear to be impossible to her, yet Weil does not hesitate to use the concept, as for example when she speaks of "the transcendental correlation of contradictories."<sup>2</sup>

Whatever precision and logical consistency such use may lack, we can hypothesise on the basis of what we know of Weil's thought that she regards all the Divine life as "transcendent" except in its aspect of creation (which from our point of view is worldly reality) which could be more properly regarded as "immanent." The terms refer then at the same time to two

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1. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 110

2. Ibid., p. 89

aspects of God as well as to two realms: That of man and that to which man as man is not immediately related. Only, of course, in some non-theistic system (pantheistic, panentheistic or atheistic) could these thus meet and man's realm be an aspect of God.

Bonhoeffer, when he spoke of "the 'beyond' of God" tells us that this "is not the beyond of our perceptive faculties" for, in his view, "epistemological theory has nothing to do with the transcendence of God."<sup>3</sup> He contented himself with summarising this truth as: "God is the 'beyond' in the midst of our life."<sup>4</sup> Transcendence in Bonhoeffer's thought, therefore, would seem to be interwoven with man's existence, bringing something from outside to that existence, but not remaining meaningful in terms of its "from outsideness."

One is inclined to say that Bonhoeffer really has a two-faceted transcendence, the one facet responsible for "the 'beyond' in the midst of our life" where the emphasis rests on a characteristic of human existence, and the other that "beyond" itself in our life where the emphasis rests on that which gives this characteristic human existence.

It would seem however that Bonhoeffer holds some of the same antipathy for the concept of a transcendent reality which he holds for religion. Thus when he studies the men in his prison to see if they still have any belief in transcendence, he detects three notions: "1) People say 'Cross fingers' . . . 2) 'touch wood,' . . . 3) 'you can't run away from fate.'"<sup>5</sup>

3. Bonhoeffer, op. cit., p. 93

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., pp. 79-80

He suggests Christian interpretations for these "as a recollection of intercessory prayer and the Church, of the wrath and grace of God and of divine providence."<sup>6</sup> If his rejection of an epistemological transcendence is matched to the image of God present in these interpretations—a God of authority who directs man's affairs and rescues him in his difficulties—one has a fair representation of the opposite of the God of suffering and weakness toward which he is moving.

Vahanian makes much of the move toward radical immanentism in Western culture and believes a fundamental anti-theism on man's part lies behind it so that it is in fact interpreted by the rule "to kill God is to become god oneself."<sup>7</sup> An immanent God can only be an idolatrous creation even as the true God by Vahanian's formulation can only be a transcendent, wholly other, since Vahanian recognises the formula: "Finitum non est capax infiniti."<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, Vahanian accepts what he calls "the Biblical notion" of transcendence and insists that God's reality "must be attested in the world and its empirical phenomena through the structures of human existence, of man's works and his word."<sup>9</sup> He thus clearly faces the same difficulties as Weil and is equally unconcerned with their ultimate logical resolution.

Van Buren, as one might predict from only a superficial knowledge of his thought, shows no inclination to use or

6. Ibid.

7. Vahanian, The Death of God, p. 230

8. Vahanian, "Beyond the Death of God," op. cit., p. 12; The Death of God, p. 231

9. Vahanian, No Other God, p. 47

justify the concept of transcendence. On the contrary, he rejects it because it suggests God is "beyond this world and experience" when it is rather the case that words sometimes fail to express what is known of precisely the ordinary world of experience.<sup>10</sup> Van Buren is one who cannot conceive that ultimately in our use of language and experience we are either omitting anything of which we can say something or that we are leaving anything out.<sup>11</sup>

William Hamilton criticises an "otherworldliness" which poses a geographical problem because "we fear, perhaps, that it commits us to a belief in the existence of some space beyond the known space of this world, and this we find hard to believe."<sup>12</sup> His own commitment is increasingly to immanent reality however, despite the fact that he followed the above opinion with an expression of his wish for an "otherworldliness stripped of its geographical problems."<sup>13</sup> Thus we find him denying that any of his atheism is based on "the usual assurance that before the holy God all our language gets broken and defracted into paradox."<sup>14</sup> Accepting no transcendent God, affirming the immanent world, transcendence itself can hardly be a problem for Hamilton.

For Altizer, process governs the problem of transcendence for he declares that "transcendence has been swallowed up by immanence," so that "no heaven can appear above the infinite

10. Van Buren, Theological Explorations, p. 181

11. Van Buren, The Edges of Language, pp. 66-67

12. Hamilton, The New Essence of Christianity, p. 110

13. Ibid.

14. Hamilton, "The Death of God Theologies Today," op. cit., pp. 27-28



stretches of a purely exterior spaciality."<sup>15</sup> "Absolute transcendence" he tells us again elsewhere, "is transformed into absolute immanence; being here and now . . . draws itself into all those powers which were once bestowed upon the Beyond."<sup>16</sup> The transcendent thus either becomes embodied in "an absolutely immanent totality"<sup>17</sup> or is "a power withholding us from a total affirmation of the world."<sup>18</sup> Ultimately therefore, Altizer can regard transcendence only as an alien power, now emptied and darkened.<sup>19</sup>

While Sölle is not explicit on this subject it is clear that transcendence must suffer the fate of the absolute to which it is logically akin, and that therefore it must be granted that it has slipped beyond the ability of modern men to grasp and affirm it. Christ's representation saves us from having to come to grips with transcendence by providing an immanent substitute for the time being. Sölle can affirm the immanent and let transcendence go because of the function of representation which holds its place in holding God's.

Braun clearly possesses no theistic transcendence with his quite straightforward atheism, yet one wonders with his emphasis on men's relations if he would not follow Kee in speaking of what is essentially a form of self-transcending behaviour. In principle however, while he might speak with great inspiration of the right kind of relations his fundamental

15. Altizer, "Word and History," op. cit., p. 128

16. Altizer, "Theology and the Death of God," op. cit., p. 98

17. Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, p. 153

18. Ibid., p. 155

19. Ibid., pp. 111-112

approach militates against a use of the concept of transcendence which would set it in opposition to immanence.

Mallard, like Altizer, as we have seen, envisions a transfiguration of transcendence<sup>20</sup> following upon the death of God in Jesus' crucifixion, but he also summarises his view as a panentheism in which God includes, but is more than, all things.<sup>21</sup> Presumably Mallard's transcendence after transfiguration is still represented by the phrase "more than" for he does not speak of the total loss of pure transcendence as does Altizer. This would suggest that the divine process which Mallard identifies, utterly reforms its immanent aspect but it does not utterly abandon something of that indeterminate aspect which theists associate with the transcendence of God.

The title of Kee's book alone is enough to give an indication of the importance which he assigns to the word transcendence, yet as we have already noted he rejects most explicitly the meaning which it usually carries in a theistic context.<sup>22</sup> One would expect Kee to parallel Hamilton and Van Buren in an avoidance of the term however, and the fact that he doesn't should emphasise the context with which he does supply the word, for Kee's use is ethical and ametaphysical. Thus rather than referring to different realities or even different aspects of God, it refers to different psycho-socio patterns which form two opposing categories. That one which he favors he regards as "transcendent" because it somehow requires

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20. Mallard, *op. cit.*, p. 334

21. *Ibid.*, p. 338

22. Kee, *op. cit.*, pp. xxvii-xxviii

of those who attempt to integrate themselves into it a conscious and sustained effort which the other, more natural, category does not.<sup>23</sup>

Of course, in speaking of transcendence as Kee uses it, one cannot forget his reference to that reality which invites faith in transcendence and then confirms it.<sup>24</sup> In the end his transcendence must mean more than ethics if we are to take this final hint seriously, though one must assume there is such consistency in even this that he does not, by it, readmit a transcendent reality beyond man's world.

#### Summary: Transcendence and Immanence

The use made of the concepts of transcendence and immanence by the Christian atheists is extremely complex. Vahanian, Sölle and Weil reflect the belief that the transcendent is utterly unavailable to man but Vahanian and Sölle provide an immanent aspect as the Word in the world or Christ the representative, whereas Weil's immanence, man's world, is an aspect of God. In this sense Weil's structure is rather like Mallard's in that Transcendence includes but extends beyond (though not in an utterly alien manner) the immanent.

Bonhoeffer, Hamilton and Altizer regard the world as immanent reality to which transcendence, whatever it means, is not alien. Thus one might say that immanence is the imminent, real world and transcendence is its special quality or aspect. Van Buren, Braun and Kee represent an ever further weakening of the original use of "transcendence" for in their thought it

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23. Ibid., p. xxvii

24. Ibid., p. 231

merely describes something special in the human experience of reality and could not be used in a metaphysical sense at all.

#### Faith, Belief and Doubt

Belief for Simone Weil, is something she demands the freedom to withhold, implying that belief is an intellectual activity manipulated at will and unessential if not sometimes even undesirable to the proper activities of the human mind.<sup>25</sup> Likewise she speaks of unbelief as something which is verbal and does not penetrate the soul,<sup>26</sup> and warns those who do believe that the ability to do so is like mathematical skill-- "a mechanical effect of nature" not to be attributed to the work of Grace.<sup>27</sup> In other words, belief is not necessarily something to be developed and, when being self-disciplined about intellectual investigations, should not be engaged in.

On the other hand, Simone Weil believes that a comparison of religions can only occur "through the miraculous virtue of sympathy" which transports us to the souls of other men; and by faith which transports us "to the very center" of the religion we study--and she tells us that here she uses faith "in the strongest sense."<sup>28</sup> Faith would thus seem, with regard to religious materials, analogous to the function of sympathy toward men, and a device which aids the search for understanding. What faith grasps--its dogmas--"are not things to be affirmed" but rather things "to be regarded from a certain

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25. Weil, Waiting on God, p. 35

26. Ibid., p. 140

27. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 26

28. Weil, Waiting on God, pp. 117-118



distance with attention, respect and love."<sup>29</sup> Ultimately Weil would seem to be giving us a principle of contemplation without affirmation<sup>30</sup> with which to approach religious matters.

Because of the indefinable boundary between fate and providence, submission and resistance, Bonhoeffer speaks of a faith which demands an "elasticity of behaviour."<sup>31</sup> Thus he regards certain actions as free of judgement or valuation when we find faith fails to distinguish between what is providence and thus to be accepted and what is fate and therefore to be resisted. Faith, like God, is not the solution to all man's problems. Nor is religion to be a pre-condition of faith, Bonhoeffer insists,<sup>32</sup> so that religious dependence on a Deus ex machina cannot be confused with Christian faith. This faith is, in Bonhoeffer, something which a man may have but not something which he may use as a crutch in the affairs of life. It is a way in which he encounters life but not a book of insight or inside information which will reveal to him life's purposes or hidden meanings.

Vahanian makes much of the fact that faith and doubt are co-ordinates in the Christian tradition and that the Christian faith properly provides for unbelief.<sup>33</sup> One characteristic of that religiosity condemned by Vahanian is that in it "faith is no longer contingent upon unfaith," largely because faith and and doubt have been severed making faith unessential to unfaith

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29. Weil, Letter to a Priest, p. 48

30. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 117

31. Bonhoeffer, op. cit., p. 74

32. Ibid., p. 110

33. Vahanian, The Death of God, p. 7

and doubt immune to faith.<sup>34</sup> Thus the Biblical pattern of the believing unbeliever and justified sinner collapses.<sup>35</sup> Both not to doubt and to doubt in isolation from belief have the same negating effect upon the Biblical pattern.

Faith thus has a role of mediation in Vahanian and this is seen even more clearly when he speaks of faith as reconciling "the two dimensions of existence--personal and impersonal, internal and external--without unifying them."<sup>36</sup> Also, faith "attempts to define man in terms of a synthesis or as the locus of a polarity and a tension between the absolute and the relative, the universal and the particular, the world and the self."<sup>37</sup> Ultimately faith means "man does not live by logical consistency" but rather, through it man comes to "the kind of self-understanding" for which authority is a symbol.<sup>38</sup>

Van Buren sees an embattled faith having lost the justification of "classical Western theism" so that it "must live by faith alone."<sup>39</sup> With the dissolution of the absolute it is challenged to a willingness "to see things in a certain way without feeling obligated to say that this is the only way in which they can be seen."<sup>40</sup> Belief likewise, should accept the limitation of not telling us there is something other to see but only to propose a way of seeing.<sup>41</sup> In our age, believing is, Van Buren says, "a matter of behaving in certain ways, walking ahead with a certain lamp to guide one's feet."<sup>42</sup>

34. Ibid., pp. 12-13

35. Ibid., p. 12

36. Ibid., p. 165

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

39. Van Buren, Theological Explorations, p. 77

40. Ibid., pp. 41-42

41. Van Buren, The Edges of Language, p. 42

42. Ibid., p. 76

Hamilton too describes an embattled faith, suggesting that rebellion against God "may be the only way religious faith can come,"<sup>43</sup> lamenting that we have not "enough faith or enough truth to satisfy us;"<sup>44</sup> and confessing that "our knowledge and our faith are in bits and pieces."<sup>45</sup> In a somewhat later period he even denies that the radical theologian has any faith at all but he does this in the context of describing such a theologian as one who has willed to lose a faith with the hope that his faithfulness will one day be transformed into an even better faith.<sup>46</sup>

Hamilton has defined faith as "the way the Christian affirms the past and appropriates the meaning of certain past events deemed to be significant,"<sup>47</sup> but he does not see this as characteristic of the radical theologian. He has also said, however, that faith is the hope that God "will no longer be absent from us" and is "a cry to the absent God."<sup>48</sup> Finally, Hamilton relates faith to doubt which he sees as a way to faith used by many and as something never finally overcome by faith, although he also insists that "these are two places, not one, and a choice must be made between them"<sup>49</sup>--a view Vahanian would ascribe to religiosity if Hamilton pushed it too far.

Faith cannot, according to Altizer, survive the triumph of worldliness in its traditional forms,<sup>50</sup> and he assigns to it

43. Hamilton, The New Essence of Christianity, p. 135

44. Ibid., p. 25

45. Ibid., p. 31

46. Hamilton, "Thursday's Child," op. cit., p. 91

47. Hamilton, "Thursday's Child," as in original version: Theology Today, January, 1964, Vol. 20 No. 4, p. 487. This passage deleted from reprint in Radical Theology.

48. Hamilton, The New Essence of Christianity, p. 62

49. Ibid., p. 59

50. Altizer, "Word and History," op. cit., p. 127

the new role of identifying and affirming the death of God.<sup>51</sup> Yet it is difficult to arrive at a clear understanding of faith in Altizer, perhaps because as he himself says, "a faith that is truly open to the world can never be wholly or purely 'faith.'"<sup>52</sup> Thus he conceives of it as independent of any given "ecclesiastical tradition or . . . doctrinal or ritual form," and as even existing without "any final assurance as to what it means to be a Christian, or what comprises the community of faith, or what are the signs of Christian witness in the world."<sup>53</sup>

Faith is neither unchanging nor confined to one form,<sup>54</sup> therefore, and the fact that "a whole new form of faith" is being demanded by a movement of the Spirit which "has passed beyond the revelation of the canonical Bible" to a whole new revelation, supports this.<sup>55</sup> This new form is essentially Altizer's Gospel of Christian atheism: The affirmation of the death of God, as we have seen, and the affirmation of the here and now as the site of the incarnate Word.

Sölle recognises that a theology of representation makes Christ dependent on us and "we may even say that he puts his God at risk, for he makes the truth of this God depend on our assent."<sup>56</sup> Yet she assumes that modern man can possibly give his assent to this meaning of Christ whereas he could not to an absolute God. It is clear in this that Sölle recognises the social and cultural form of belief, the fact that it exists in

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51. Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, p. 96

52. Ibid., p. 18

53. Ibid., p. 27

54. Ibid., p. 18

55. Ibid., p. 27

56. Sölle, op. cit., p. 123



a milieu and if belief is expected for something, that something must be consistent with that milieu.

What modern man cannot believe and the cultural aspects of that situation, are clearly recognised by Braun also, as when he refers to the problem of the titles of respect which the New Testament applies to Jesus. Yet he recognises a network in which belief must function in the experiences of obligation and relation and in redirecting our understanding of "God" along these lines he is attempting to meet the situation in a manner not unlike Sölle.

Mallard would seem to make faith a kind of confidence when he urges faith that life and death "find a significance in the coming Kingdom of Christ."<sup>57</sup> Also he urges an "acceptance of the Cross and Resurrection" which is "an articulate, intellectual act of 'belief'" in its expression but a "trustful confidence" in its essence which makes the acceptance a "discipleship."<sup>58</sup> Mallard's belief would seem to be the ability to accept that the dialectical nature of existence has a meaningful future. This would all seem to suggest that the matter of faith and belief is a matter of will to reflect an attitude of optimism and affirmation about life as it is encountered.

Kee places much emphasis on a distinction which he makes between faith and belief. The former, faith, he suggests characterises our age and is something which one may choose to have or not.<sup>59</sup> Belief on the other hand, comes with our culture

57. Mallard, op. cit., p. 341

58. Ibid., p. 339

59. Kee, op. cit., p. ix

so that we cannot decide to believe, and as ours "is an age without religious beliefs" and "in particular, belief in God has disappeared," Kee finds it "tempting to suggest that Christian faith might be presented today without belief in God."<sup>60</sup> The Christian faith to which he refers here, is defined by Kee as "commitment with ultimate concern to that which came to expression in Jesus Christ"<sup>61</sup>--namely what Kee calls "the way of transcendence."

#### Summary: Faith, Belief and Doubt

The most notable thing about our subjects is that none of them treat belief as the acceptance of doctrine or dogma--i.e. the catechetical approach. All of them retain a fluidity which seeks to root itself deeply in the contemporary experience of reality, either to draw its understanding of a living faith from that or to discover the mode for interpreting the traditional content into the new format. In any case, while all are alive to the needs of commitment and involvement there is no horror of contemporary unbelief and atheism, but a determined will to respond to it, in it and even with it.

#### Man and His Proper Life

The self, for Simone Weil, is "only the shadow which sin and error cast by stopping the light of God" and that shadow she takes to be "being."<sup>62</sup> Here, as in other statements with different images but the same point, she makes it plain that man is not, in her view, ontologically autonomous, and that

60. Ibid.

61. Ibid., p. 193

62. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 35

such "being" as he has is neither authentically his own nor authentic being.<sup>63</sup> Thus the only free act she grants to him is "the destruction of the 'I.'"<sup>64</sup> The "I" is destructible precisely because "in the ego there is nothing whatever, no psychological element, which external circumstances could not do away with."<sup>65</sup>

The soul, however, is at least partially identified by the love within it which is "divine and uncreated"--in fact, "the love of God for God which is passing through" the soul.<sup>66</sup> Weil thus understands that to be a channel or medium which provides for the flow of God's self-love is the sole purpose of our creation.<sup>67</sup> Man therefore must cause the fading and alienation of all that he considers himself and must consent to being only "a point through which God's divine love for self passes."<sup>68</sup>

Weil refers to the process of man's willful abandonment of his "being" as "decreation" by which he makes "something created pass into the uncreated."<sup>69</sup> She urges therefore both the full denial of oneself and detachment--even from salvation.<sup>70</sup> Man's task is "to empty desire, finally of all content, to desire in the void, to desire without any wishes."<sup>71</sup> Her view of man therefore is a view of an ultimately unreal and inauthentic being which properly empties

63. Weil, First and Last Notebooks, p. 87; Intimations of Christianity, pp. 197-198

64. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 23

65. Weil, Waiting on God, p. 152

66. Ibid., p. 76

67. Ibid.

68. Weil, Intimations of Christianity, pp. 197-198

69. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 28

70. Weil, Waiting on God, pp. 76 and 148

71. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 13

itself of what it discovers itself to be so as to allow God's self-love to flow without obstruction.

It is crucial to recognise however, that man does this by himself loving both God, and also the world as utterly subject to necessity, even though in the one case he therefore loves what does not exist for him and in the other case what seems most unloveable. In her language of negation Weil does not allow men to turn their backs on the world in exchange for the security of the divine but demands precisely the contrary.<sup>72</sup>

Bonhoeffer speaks of being a Christian in terms of a "plunge . . . into the life of a godless world" and "participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world."<sup>73</sup> Such a man does not use religion "to gloss over" the world's ungodliness, nor is he Christian by virtue of some religious act.<sup>74</sup> Rather, Bonhoeffer feels, the Christian man is worldly in terms of "taking life in . . . stride with all its duties, and problems, its successes and failures, its experiences and helplessness."<sup>75</sup> He cannot become arrogant in success or led astray in failure if, by living in the world, he is participating in God's suffering.<sup>76</sup>

As we have said, man is autonomous according to Bonhoeffer, and a part of man's autonomy for which Bonhoeffer speaks is his freedom from guilt<sup>77</sup>--doubtless the same modern characteristic as Vahanian makes note of and calls "the ethic of innocence."<sup>78</sup>

72. Weil, First and Last Notebooks, p. 324

73. Bonhoeffer, op. cit., p. 123

74. Ibid.

75. Ibid.

76. Ibid., p. 125

77. Ibid., p. 73

78. Vahanian, The Death of God, p. 193



Men do not understand their difficulties in terms of sin and forgiveness. Nor, Bonhoeffer suggests, was Jesus one who brought people to an awareness of their sins but rather to a vision of reversed values.<sup>79</sup> With this emphasis Bonhoeffer buttresses his opposition to inwardness--the great crime of religious internalisation.<sup>80</sup> There is no value in a hyper self-awareness yet an emphasis on sin invites this condition. Again Bonhoeffer would emphasise: Man is a whole and religion tends to ignore this or to break down the unity by reason of its characteristic reaching of only parts of human existence.

Salvation, Bonhoeffer sees, must apply to men in this world for the whole which they are is a worldly entity. Thus salvation is not a salvation from the world. The Christian hope of resurrection "sends a man back to his life on earth in a wholly new way," unlike a mythological hope which promises removal from earth; and redemption is "redemption on this side of death." Bonhoeffer thus suggests that it is improper to see Christianity as a religion of salvation. He would prefer to develop a Christianity without salvation as it is generally understood, but with the possibility of attaining a situation by drinking "the earthly cup to the lees" in which "the crucified and risen Lord" is with him and he is "crucified and risen with Christ." Whatever this cryptic formula implies, it is not a preference for eternity over history or escape from an existence of suffering.<sup>81</sup>

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79. Bonhoeffer, *op. cit.*, p. 115

80. *Ibid.*, pp. 117-118

81. *Ibid.*, pp. 112-113

Vahanian's "ethic of innocence" designates the attitude of post-Christian man who pleads innocence "with respect to evil and injustice" but who lives by "an atheistic ethic of responsibility and decision designed to establish the initial perception of innocence."<sup>82</sup> This attitude is accompanied by one which "so apprehends and construes this world that it is not innately endowed with a religious or divine dimension."<sup>83</sup> Despite the changes which brought man to his post-Christian phase, Vahanian sees his fundamental quest as unchanged, being a quest "for peace and security, tranquility and prosperity, both corporal and spiritual."<sup>84</sup> He concedes that the means and the goal have changed, however, with the shift of directions from transcendental to immanent.<sup>85</sup>

Vahanian's vision of correcting the present situation which leaves man abandoned to atheism, religiosity or idolatry, is one of cultural change spearheaded by the Church as the "avant-garde of society, as the axis of culture."<sup>86</sup> At present the Christian faith is culturally estranged because of the death of God<sup>87</sup> and it will not "survive or develop without a . . . cultural reality manifest in all realms of the spirit from theology to art and literature as well as on all levels of life from morality to economics and politics."<sup>88</sup> Just as we were forced to a methodological atheism by the loss of the cultural concept of God, we cannot return to theism without a

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82. Vahanian, The Death of God, p. 193

83. Ibid.

84. Ibid., pp. 190-191

85. Ibid., pp. 183 and 190-191

86. Vahanian, No Other God, p. 99

87. Ibid., p. 32

88. Vahanian, "The Future of Christianity in a Post-Christian Era," op. cit., p. 265

new, valid (i.e. transcendent) cultural concept. For Vahanian, man's proper state is inextricably bound up with society.

Van Buren picks up on Bonhoeffer's opposition to inwardness and religion's private character and portray's faithfulness to "God" as "living by law, not in developing some inner state."<sup>89</sup> He also speaks of the Christian as one "concerned for man" whose concern Van Buren calls a "humanism" defined by Jesus and his contagious freedom.<sup>90</sup> Such a man has a way of life containing "elements of wonder, awe, and worship" (he will also put it as seeing the ordinary as extraordinary<sup>91</sup>) which "is bound up with a basic conviction concerning the world and man's place in it which bears directly on decisions and actions."<sup>92</sup> With regard to Jesus his relationship is one of obedience and of letting Jesus be the way, the truth and the life for him.<sup>93</sup>

Van Buren, in looking at man, is clearly most impressed by the fact that man is a "linguistic being in a linguistically apprehended world," however.<sup>94</sup> This is so true for him that he even insists that "if there is anything beyond language . . . it is unsayable and therefore unknowable."<sup>95</sup> Also he is fundamentally convinced of the fact that Christians are first and foremost men, and men of our culture--thus also secular.<sup>96</sup> Van Buren's Christian is distinguished only by the fact that he

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89. Van Buren, The Edges of Language, p. 75

90. Van Buren, The Secular Meaning of the Gospel, p. 160

91. Van Buren, Theological Explorations, p. 170

92. Van Buren, The Secular Meaning of the Gospel, p. 101

93. Ibid., p. 54

94. Van Buren, The Edges of Language, pp. 159-160

95. Ibid.

96. Van Buren, The Edges of Language, p. 168; The Secular Meaning of the Gospel, pp. 81 and 176; "On Doing Theology," Talk of God, Royal Institute of Philosophy, p. 61

tends to see things in a certain way,<sup>97</sup> he has been struck by the Biblical story,<sup>98</sup> or he belongs to a community which tells a story of its past and looks forward to a particular future.<sup>99</sup> Still, he is always a man of this world and of this world only, and his Christianity in no way changes that.

In The New Essence of Christianity, Hamilton sketched an ethical spectrum stretching from rebellion and activism which seeks to transform the world, to resignation, passivity and suffering in the world--the whole of which was open to a Christian from which to choose a style of life.<sup>100</sup> He experiments with many other ways of understanding the Christian life subsequent to this book, however, and that the subject seems to be one of the major areas of theology for him is seen both by his concentration upon it and by his belief that "ability to shape new kinds of personal and corporate existence" may be the crucial test of a theology in its own time.<sup>101</sup>

One of Hamilton's developments centered on the concept of a continuation of the movement, begun with the Protestant reformation, from the cloister to the world. It is a movement away from God and religion to the world and Jesus in the world.<sup>102</sup> Christian life in this development is characterised as "discernment of Jesus beneath the worldly masks . . . (and) as becoming Jesus."<sup>103</sup> This theme is characteristic of

97. Van Buren, The Secular Meaning of the Gospel, p. 156

98. Van Buren, "On Doing Theology," op. cit., p. 59

99. Ibid., p. 62

100. Hamilton, The New Essence of Christianity, p. 146

101. Hamilton, "American Theology," op. cit., p. 7

102. Hamilton, "The Death of God Theologies Today," op. cit., pp. 36-37

103. Ibid., p. 50



Hamilton's attitudes and values which consistently place ethics and men's relationships with each other in the center of his thought. It seems the case, ultimately, that this is precisely what Christianity is all about to Hamilton.

Altizer envisions the birth of "a new and liberated humanity."<sup>104</sup> Such a humanity wills the death of God as part of a dialectical process in which "no-saying to God . . . makes possible a yes-saying to human existence,"<sup>105</sup> loving the world in "a total affirmation of an actual and immediate present."<sup>106</sup> This love for the present finds "redemptive meaning" in the symbol of Eternal Recurrence which provides us with a portrait of "a new totality of bliss."<sup>107</sup> Such a totality is absolutely immanent yet embodies "in its immediacy all which once appeared and was real in the form of transcendence."<sup>108</sup> This totality the Christian can name "as the present and living body of Christ."<sup>109</sup>

It follows from this that Altizer can express himself in terms highly reminiscent of Hamilton and speak of seeking "that Christ who is real here and now for us."<sup>110</sup> Likewise, realising the radical nature of his view, he can speak of an ultimate choice which the Christian must make between "the God who is actually manifest and real in the established form of faith," or the confession of the death of God and "a quest for

- 104. Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, pp. 20 and 111
- 105. Altizer, "Theology and the Death of God," op. cit., p. 98
- 106. Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, p. 155
- 107. Ibid., p. 153
- 108. Ibid.
- 109. Ibid.
- 110. Altizer, Toward a New Christianity, p. 11

a whole new form of faith."<sup>111</sup> Altizer does not actually grant validity to a form of Christianity which chooses the first, as we have already seen. The new form of the Christian faith of which he initiates an extensive portrayal becomes the new form of valid human existence and self-understanding.

The critical issue about man for Dorotheé Sölle, is portrayed by the problem in "the idea that the individual is irreplaceable."<sup>112</sup> As she states, "the heroic conception of irreplaceability cannot survive the test of reality,"<sup>113</sup> for men are irreplaceable only to those who love them.<sup>114</sup> Thus she develops the synthesis of the individual as irreplaceable yet representable.<sup>115</sup> This concept functions not only in Christ's role as God's representative but also in Christ's role as our representative, holding God's place for him on the one hand during this time of what is from our point of view the death of God, and representing us to a God who is absent on the other hand.<sup>116</sup>

Sölle uses the factors of personality and provisionality to prevent representation from becoming replacement, and to distinguish magical and technological representation from that which is part of a personal transaction.<sup>117</sup> The uniqueness of the individual personality in such situations and the temporary state of the arrangement, are sufficient guarantees in Sölle's

111. Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, p. 147

112. Sölle, op. cit., pp. 15-16

113. Ibid., p. 51

114. Ibid., p. 46

115. Ibid., p. 50

116. Ibid., p. 137

117. Ibid., p. 65

opinion, that nothing of value is permanently lost in the solution which she offers to man's ultimate problem--that of his relationship to God.

It is clear that Braun, like Hamilton, would emphasise the ethical, and the subtleties of men's relations with each other. Braun expects that man can and will discriminate between what he may do and what he is under obligation to do. With the help of the New Testament and attention to these variations in experience, Braun suggests that it is precisely in this aspect of human existence that man encounters the most awesome possibilities and meanings available to him.

Mallard reflects themes from Hamilton when he writes that "the finding by man of his own Cross and Resurrection" will result in Christ Jesus being "formed" in his interpersonal relations.<sup>118</sup> Mallard also affirms, like Bonhoeffer, man's wholeness as a "totally existing creature, an 'animated body,' not an 'encased soul.'"<sup>119</sup> He asserts that "his existence must be affirmed--the mystery of his birth, the contradictoriness of his life, the reality of his death--if he is to know his promise as creature."<sup>120</sup> Thus in Mallard's view it is proper to call anything sin "which in any way alienates a man from decisively dealing with the issues of his existence in faith," and such a thing will be rooted in either "dreaming innocence or despair."<sup>121</sup>

Kee, like Vahanian, notes that the modern atheist may be the possessor of a rigid and strict ethic, wholly as responsible

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118. Mallard, *op. cit.*, p. 339

119. *Ibid.*, p. 338

120. *Ibid.*

121. *Ibid.*

as any, so that "it is far from clear that religious belief is an advantage in moral matters."<sup>122</sup> He thus speaks of two ways of life, one "to which we hardly need to be drawn" and which "seems to be the most natural life for man" so that it is not so much that we choose it as that we simply find ourselves with it "when we are old enough to realise that it is not the only possible life;" and the other a way of life "by which we transcend our 'nature.'"<sup>123</sup> As he goes on to say, however, the latter "may ultimately prove more natural, since in it we find fulfillment."<sup>124</sup>

Specifically, Kee believes men tend to be concerned with "having a good time" and guarding their standard of living rather than with "helping others, fighting for their rights."<sup>125</sup> He sees Jesus as a norm for this latter way of life, the way of transcendence.<sup>126</sup> Kee suggests men reject this way because it requires effort, and he uses the word "sin" to describe a failure to accept Jesus as normative for their life style.<sup>127</sup> Yet, optimistically, Kee sees a growth of interest in the way of transcendence in our age.<sup>128</sup>

#### Summary: Man and His Proper Life

All the Christian atheists see man as being challenged by and left with this life and only it in order to fulfill his purpose. Weil's vision that man must love life corresponds to the urgings of the others that man accept himself within the

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122. Kee, op. cit., p. xxv

123. Ibid., p. xxvii

124. Ibid.

125. Ibid., p. 219

126. Ibid., pp. 218-219

127. Ibid., pp. 143-144

128. Ibid., pp. 219-220



context of the world. Sölle, Altizer and Mallard may hint that human life possesses some meaning or significance not readily understandable in light of its finitude but even they do not formulate it as a "life after death."

Indeed, the significance of being Christian is consistently developed in terms of what it signifies for man living in the world. Hamilton, Braun, Kee and the early Van Buren formulate this predominantly in terms of ethics. Otherwise, as in later Van Buren, Vahanian and Sölle, it has to do with the verbal and thought structures man develops and by which he then attempts to live. We see this in Bonhoeffer too, although it is difficult to know what ethical meanings he may have wished to be read into his vision of man "suffering with God." In Weil, Altizer and Mallard, these structures are of such magnitude as to be virtually metaphysical.

## CHAPTER 5: Summary of Christian Atheism

## The Way of Negation

There can be no question that Simone Weil constitutes a class by herself. Her theology leads one into deeper and deeper negations even amid the descriptive and affirmative language and images. The tone, tension and direction of her thought roots itself in the consistent ontologically negative language of the mystics. As Altizer says, "no-saying has surely been given a contemporary voice in Simone Weil."<sup>1</sup>

Yet insofar as this is true it is surely novel too for it is a no-saying which does not oppose this earth in an embrace of the divine unity. Rather man's proper relationship to God is one founded on world-love, self-negation, abandonment of all which one really is. Weil's no-saying is of the kind which sees this world and this life as a facet of the divine life but from man's point of view as the arena of detachment from desires for the unearthly.

## The Secretly Sacred World

Bonhoeffer began the line in which we place Hamilton, Altizer and Mallard. This line urges the unrestricted affirmation of the world and human life and condemns anything or any idea which would shift man's utter commitment from the present existence which he does have. They write of this world and this existence as somehow reflecting the values which in the old theism were reserved for God, and they do this by speaking

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1. Altizer, Toward a New Christianity, p. 105

of God or Christ in the world in some manner which itself utterly and unqualifiedly affirms what it finds there. Thus affirming the world is faithfulness, not unfaithfulness to the reality previously understood to be distinct from the world.

Qualifications are necessary. Insofar as he may have understood that worldliness with only the presence of a suffering and impotent God available is merely the condition of fledglings having been pushed from the nest by a still transcendent and omnipotent God, Bonhoeffer might still be called a theist. However, incomplete as his thought may be in Letters and Papers from Prison, Bonhoeffer does not seem to be adjusting the theology of God's immanent form only but of the whole God/world view of theism. Thus Steeman can assert that Bonhoeffer's adulthood of man lies behind modern atheism<sup>2</sup> and Schideler can suggest that if one wishes to see what the death of God means one should go to Bonhoeffer.<sup>3</sup> Bonhoeffer may be less explicit in his atheism than one would wish for clarity, but many have seen it there in what he wrote.

When we include Hamilton here, we have in mind those themes of Christ in the world and Jesus as a place to be, which we recognise with Ogletree as having special importance in Hamilton's later writings.<sup>4</sup> It is impossible to tell the extent to which such images contained a dynamic view of a divine process such as Altizer develops with his kenotic theology but

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2. Steeman, "Psychological and Sociological Aspects of Modern Atheism," op. cit., p. 28
  3. Schideler, "Taking the Death of God Seriously," The Meaning of the Death of God, Murchland (editor), p. 110
  4. Ogletree, The "Death of God" Controversy, p. 32

it is certainly possible to see in them the seeds of such developments, and some sort of qualification on viewing Hamilton as reflecting a progressively straight-forward and hard atheism such as seemed to stand out at times in that same period of his life.

#### Understanding Life Atheistically

Van Buren, Braun and Kee share in common a somewhat more "demythologised" or "secular" approach to explaining the world than any of the others. They are deeply concerned with the pattern or style of man's life, although in Van Buren this has a decidedly linguistic emphasis and in Braun and Kee an almost solely ethical one. Something about life drives all three to speak in the language of religious assertions and they display a willingness to use the word "God" for that which strikes them as most significant.

Certainly some would want to include Hamilton in this category and Hamilton himself says nothing which would make this unreasonable, and much, especially in The New Essence of Christianity, which argues for it. We have accepted Altizer's interpretation which suggests that Hamilton meant something far more symbolic and mythical like Altizer himself, because Hamilton does not deny it but goes to the trouble, rather, of discussing how he differs from Altizer, and does so in a manner suggesting that by-in-large he identifies his thought with much of Altizer's tone and technique, although not with all of it.<sup>5</sup>

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5. cf. Hamilton, "The Death of God Theologies Today," op. cit., and Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, p. 11



### Theism in an Ocean of Atheism

Vahanian and Sölle share the distinction of believing that the social and cultural climate does not permit a true theism and that therefore some technique must be developed to see man through this period. They develop a method which allows that natural atheism to run its course and still preserve the possibility of a return to theism with its absolute and divine transcendence.

### General Comparisons

Certain not insignificant generalities may be expressed at this point. Weil, like Altizer and Mallard, discovers a process in God which explains her condition of being without a God. Weil, however, will choose precisely that which Altizer and Mallard regard with horror and, in their theologies, from which they will seek liberation: The negation of immanent reality's ontological ground and autonomy. Thus in Weil's thought God's movement of self-emptying and withdrawal demands her atheism (setting aside here the further aspect of his non-existence which also demands it); in Altizer and Mallard, God's incarnation demands their atheism. In Weil the movement of the Divine in relation to man is away from; in Altizer and Mallard it is a movement into. For all the net effect is the same: There is no objective deity upon the horizon of man's reality and existence.

Van Buren, Braun and Kee are men whose atheism is quite matter of fact, but whose view of human existence finds many complexities in it and many aspects of it which lend themselves to the challenges of the Christian faith apart from its

theism. Hamilton would, at times, seem to want to assume a straightforward atheism comparable to that of these three but this aspect of his writing is not sustained or adequately univocal to be accorded more than status as one of several positions which he assumes. Like Van Buren and Kee, however, he does give considerable time to demonstrating Jesus' unique significance to modern men as a model.

Bonhoeffer and Vahanian make an interesting contrast. Bonhoeffer sees God in Jesus, Vahanian denies that Jesus can be available when God is not. Bonhoeffer affirms the full autonomy of man and his world, Vahanian affirms man's ultimate ontological dependence upon the transcendent even if he recognises a necessary epistemological independence. Bonhoeffer would see the end of Christianity's religious form but Vahanian hopes the church as the vanguard of culture will lead our civilisation back to a valid religious form.

A worldview which sees this world under the influence of a transcendent one is essentially denied by Bonhoeffer, Van Buren, Hamilton, Braun and Kee. Bonhoeffer's implicit belief that man has not always been mature enough for God to make him live without God's help is troublesome here and raises the question that must also be raised with Altizer and Mallard--namely the question of "when" or "how." Certainly with regard to Altizer and Mallard the process of which they speak constitutes an end of transcendent influence but not the utter denial of it, insofar as past stages are concerned and insofar as the incarnation of the Spirit or Word is a process. In terms of this issue it is probably best to include Bonhoeffer, as we have done, because the relevant qualification

is not explicit in his writings; and it is probably best to exclude Altizer and Mallard because a recognition of a process originating in the transcendent is so explicit in their thought.

Weil, Vahanian and Sölle share in common a sharp distinction between recognising an absolute autonomy such as Altizer formulates with special clarity, and recognising a specifically epistemological autonomy. Because man cannot know the reality on which he is ontologically dependent man is thrown back upon the world as his source of everything and his sole environment as man. They do recognise an autonomy for man and the world but it is of a certain kind and its status is conditioned in a manner man cannot participate in and is thus irrelevant to him as such.

Vahanian and Sölle, in sharing the problem of providing for both the transcendent and the immanent realms, solve it differently. Vahanian looks to culture, spearheaded by a valid religious body, the Church, to lead men again to a place where they will know and accept the transcendent with iconoclasm rather than methodological atheism. Sölle conceives of Christ in his role as representative providing the mediation necessary during a temporary period of the transcendent's absence or apparent absence to men. Sometimes also in Hamilton we catch this theme of a God, still out there somewhere, however inconceivable, whom we must try to reach by some process or "holding action" until he becomes newly available--but the theme is again inconsistent and in this case overshadowed by the finally stronger ones of God's permanent loss and a new mundane identity of Jesus.

## PART I: GENERAL SURVEY

## B. Buddhism

## CHAPTER 6: Preliminary Comments

## Introduction

There are two closely related reasons for giving a summary of the teachings of Buddhism in a thesis such as this. Provided, of course, that it is a personal summary and not just a series of extractions from others' "Introductions," it will reveal both the position of the author on controversial matters and it will reveal the personal biases, attitudes and approaches of the author. There is serious danger of under-emphasising these, the effect of which could not be overemphasised in a study of this nature.

Nor would it be wise to assume that the content of Buddhist "doctrine" is clear and shares a consensus which would silence all but the most argumentative interpreters. The problem which Christians have always had in giving a simple answer to the supposedly simple question of "God" is a superb example of the innate difficulties which characterise the most fundamental formulations and symbols of religious traditions. Any interpreter of Buddhism who believes that the words which he puts on a page are adequate to the fluid depths of religious concepts in that tradition must be guilty of the most profound misunderstanding.

Even where the English equivalent to the original languages is relatively straightforward and reflects a long and well documented history, one must be aware of the fluidity of that word within its own cultural context and in the minds of



those scholars who have accepted it. How much more so is that the case when the tradition is one of utilising the foreign word or words because no equivalent exists in our language?

Furthermore, such facile generalisations as "Buddhism is atheistic" or "Buddhism is a world-denying faith" must expect to encounter challenge from the scholars on many fronts who are all too aware that a movement with a history of two and a half millennium which has been given multi-cultural and multi-linguistic development is not likely--indeed can never be--monolithically one thing and not another.

An entirely separate reason for such a summary as this should be understood to exist in precisely the need to expound on the matter of whether or not, and if so in what sense or senses, Buddhism is actually atheistic. On the surface it should be simple enough to establish this matter, even if one cannot assume a position regarding it on the basis of a precursory view of Buddhist teachings. Indeed, most students of Buddhism if simply asked if it is atheistic, would not hesitate in giving an affirmative response.

Yet, by the same token, few students of Buddhism on reflection would wish to leave that response unqualified. We would even hazard the guess that most, having once begun to express the qualifications, would end in frustration with the question and the manner in which it poses the problem. At any level other than the most superficial, which would be wholly inadequate and undesirable in this context, everything said about Buddhism and everything which it is claimed Buddhism says, is debatable.

A personal summary must necessarily be included therefore, and it should reflect the author's own preferred language for speaking about Buddhist things, understandings of the doctrines, interpretations of the symbols, etc., and evaluation of the variations within it. This is not a denial that there can be an "objective" summary but it is a decided assertion that what would be meant by an "objective" summary of Buddhism should not be allowed to hide a certain inevitable and desirable subjectivity.

At most an objective summary would reflect a wide base in its sources, a respect for consensus and suspicion of highly singular treatments (which should be accepted only if one is prepared to offer a thoroughly formulated argument on their behalf), and a caution born of the knowledge that no single man can master all the materials belonging to a great tradition such as Buddhism. It would by no means remove the inherently subjective character of a sensitive and involved study such as must be allowed if not sought in religious philosophy.

Finally, it must be stated that a summary of the basic teachings of Buddhism is necessary here because Buddhism has been considered with very specific questions in view, which means that to some extent it is a specialised interpretation of Buddhism. These specific considerations at the back of our mind in the review of Buddhist teachings are the thoughts of the Christian atheists, the difficulties Christianity is presently undergoing which may have provoked or largely accounted for those thoughts, and, admittedly, the possibility of finding something in Buddhism as yet unseen and unexploited which might add to the analysis and solution of these problems.

Before beginning our summary, it is probably desirable to emphasise a point already made. Our study of Buddhism was a "book study." It was the result of neither direct personal contact with many Buddhists or a Buddhist culture, nor of primary sources. It depends on translations, interpretations and observations of others. Finally, however, it also became its own thing, reflected in what follows.

### Two Systems

In contemporary Buddhist studies and translations available to the linguistically limited Westerner, much is made of the difference between the two major systems: Mahayana and Hinayana or Theravada. Indeed, generally this division is treated as absolute and the categorisation of the various schools according to it is taken to be a matter of great significance in understanding them. Although these two divisions are represented by such diversities among the various schools today that one wonders if the distinction is as clear as it once may have been, the attempt is almost always made to describe the two systems in terms which emphasise the differences between them.

For the purpose of this thesis too, an account of each system will be undertaken, but not so much for the purpose of isolating and identifying schools and sects as for the purpose of presenting some perspective on Buddhist thought which can function for comparisons and contrasts in the study of Christian atheism. We will therefore follow this two-fold division, largely ignoring the Yogacara attempt at synthesis and the substantive Tantric developments which are so highly

individualistic as to perhaps deserve, in some wider treatment, analysis as a division beyond that of Mahayana and Theravada.

It will be noted also in the process that we prefer the term "Theravada" to that of "Hinayana" because of the derogatory nature of the latter. It does seem likely that the present day Theravada sects possess a tradition born in the ancient Theravada school, but our choice of the name is not intended as an argument for this theory which is likely to be finally and fully demonstrated only with advanced archeological, textual and linguistic evidence.



## CHAPTER 7: Theravada General Teaching

The Theravada system relies fundamentally on the Pali canon which is broken down into three divisions: The rules for monastic discipline, the teaching of the Buddha and his monks (which is subdivided into five collections), and the seven books of later development containing philosophical, scientific and psychological ideas.<sup>1</sup> The Theravada possess ancient traditions as to the source of these writings, but as with Christian scripture, these have come under attack as a result of the discoveries in modern scriptural criticism and are generally rejected by Western scholars. One very practical result is that it has become virtually impossible to be certain that any of the strata of materials in the Pali canon represent direct and accurate quotations of the Buddha (Gotama).

This is most important to the Theravada because they claim to represent the oldest and most accurate form of Buddhist teaching. In turn it is also important to Western students of Buddhism because the Pali canon, and with it this bias, represented the first tradition to gain a strong foothold in the West which occurred prior to the full impact of modern textual criticism with the result that to some extent Western students of Buddhism have had to reorient their understanding of Theravada development even as have the Theravada themselves. In many of the older studies this bias is deeply ingrained and must be met with the greatest caution.

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1. Schumann, Buddhism: An Outline of its Teachings and Schools (subsequently: Buddhism), pp. 36-37

### The First Truth

Despite these difficulties there remains a body of teachings extracted largely from the second division of the Pali canon, called the Suttas, which is treated as the teaching of the Buddha. This "Truth" which the Buddha taught may be called the Dharma--a word which serves many purposes as we shall see. The Dharma can be summarised in many ways, but in the Theravada tradition, one of the most popular is based on what is believed to be the first sermon of the Buddha after his enlightenment (according to tradition). In this sermon he described the world, or "samsara," as characterised by "dukkha." The significance of this latter word in this context is not easily grasped, yet it is fundamental to the basic teaching with which we are concerned here. Most often it is translated as "suffering," but one also encounters such meanings as "pain," "a disquieting struggle," "unsatisfactoriness."<sup>2</sup>

In human terms, dukkha is embodied in birth, disease, old age, death, union with the disagreeable, separation from the agreeable, frustration in one's desires and goals.<sup>3</sup> Lama Govinda suggests that it is to be seen as "a part of our self-created being, and not as a quality of the external world or the effects of an arbitrary power outside ourselves."<sup>4</sup> Thus he can say:

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2. e.g. Dayal, The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature, pp. 156-157; Murti, The Central Philosophy of Buddhism, p. 344; Nyanatiloka, Guide Through the Abhidhamma-Pitaka, p. 30; Stcherbatsky, Buddhist Logic, Vol. I, p. 7

3. Dayal, op. cit., p. 157

4. Govinda, The Psychological Attitude of Early Buddhism, pp. 51-52

The suffering which Buddhism is essentially concerned with is--I might say--cosmic suffering, the suffering implicit in the cosmic law which chains us to our deeds, good as well as bad, and drives us incessantly round in a restless circle from form to form. In short it is the suffering of bondage.<sup>5</sup>

The total understanding of this illimitable suffering is interwoven with the two other "marks" or characteristics of reality with which it is usually associated: The utter impermanence of everything and the ultimate soullessness of everything--"anicca" and "anatta" respectively. The three are really only different views of the same insight, and when all three are spoken of with the intent of specifying suffering, impermanence and soullessness, dukkha can serve to capture their combined essence, so extensive is its meaning.

A brief look at anicca and anatta will readily reveal this close relationship to dukkha and the inter-meshing of the three. Anicca, as we have said, is the assertion that reality is characterised by impermanence. Change is all-pervasive, "thus things are different every moment; difference of time is difference of thing, at no two moments is a thing identical."<sup>6</sup> The force of the teaching of anicca is directed at "the illusion that there was an eternal, unchangeable, static reality either in the visible or ideal areas of experience."<sup>7</sup> In adopting this as a mark of reality, the Buddhist is proclaiming that "if change is to be accepted as real, the abiding permanent element must be discarded as unreal."<sup>8</sup>

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5. Ibid., p. 51

6. Murti, op. cit., p. 71

7. Streng, Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning, p. 38

8. Murti, op. cit., p. 62

Such a basic truth is utterly critical to man, for if he is ignorant of the fact that "no phenomenon is permanent-- nothing abides;" then:

. . . his proclivities nurtured  
accordingly, a man lives out of harmony  
with himself, his fellows, his world.  
He suffers.<sup>9</sup>

Anicca accounts for man's inability to hold on to and possess any thing--even himself, and that inability is the source of no small amount of man's physical and psychological suffering whenever he engages in attempts to preserve or protect things in his world. To say that ultimately nothing is permanent is to recognise the inevitable pain of loss wherever pleasure is caused by attachment to or desire for something. Thus anicca and suffering mirror each other. To look into suffering is to find impermanence, to look into impermanence is to find suffering.

Anatta follows naturally. If everything is impermanent, not only is man impermanent but all that he signifies, everything of which he is composed, all that he believes himself to be is impermanent too. There is, in other words, no immortal soul, no eternal and unchangeable entity in which he might take sanctuary from anicca. This teaching is the seal of the consistency and totality of anicca, for it insists that "the so-called personality consists of a congeries of ever-changing elements, of a flow of them, without any perdurable and stable element at all."<sup>10</sup> There is no soul, there can be no soul

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9. Welbon, The Buddhist Nirvana and its Western Interpreters, p. vii

10. Stcherbatsky, Buddhist Logic, Vol. I, p. 4



and thus insofar as man desires to continue he is doomed to the pain of frustration because of his own impermanence.

Treated even more broadly, anatta means that man too is dukkha even as he is anicca. Thus in that first sermon the Buddha makes the statement that "the five Groups of Grasping are suffering,"<sup>11</sup> in reference to the parts of man which are themselves undergoing perpetual change yet which never cease to reflect man's instinctive grasping for permanence and being.

The five groups, "skandha," are:

1. Body
2. Sensation
3. Perception
4. Mental Phenomena (e.g. forces, drives, volitions)
5. Consciousness<sup>12</sup>

This list constitutes one of the traditional ways of the Buddhist to view himself, for in the functioning of each can be observed the principles of dukkha, anicca and anatta. They are devoid of soul and permanence and they receive and engender suffering.

Further, they inspire the false notion of the self as something essential, so that men think such things as:

This skandha [body, etc.] is I.  
I have this skandha.  
 This skandha is the essence of me.  
 The essence of me is this skandha.<sup>13</sup>

Properly seen, the skandha should help man understand that "there is no soul at all, but the personality consists of these groups and nothing more."<sup>14</sup>

11. Mahavaga 1, 6, 19; Schumann, op. cit., p. 39

12. Ibid., p. 42

13. Avadana-Cataka ii, 75, IIff.; Dayal, op. cit., p. 73

14. McGovern, A Manual of Buddhist Philosophy, Vol. I, p. 83

In this view of man, as Stcherbatsky points out, the Buddhist discovered:

. . . a world consisting of a flow of innumerable particulars, consisting on the one side of what we see, what we hear, what we smell, what we taste and what we touch; and on the other side--of simple awareness accompanied by feelings, ideas, volitions, whether good volitions or bad ones, but no Soul, no God and no Matter, nothing enduring and substantial in general. <sup>15</sup>

As is explicit here, the impetus of dukkha, anicca and anatta is toward a straightforward atheism. The three marks of the world, summarised in the First Truth which the Buddha taught--that all the world is suffering--present an understanding of man and of reality which denies any eternal being whatsoever. Those who see in the world the mark of any unchanging, personal being would have to be, by this view, mistaken.

#### The Second and Third Truths

It is not, however, the end of the matter from the standpoint of living beings to say that they are impermanent and soulless, possessing only an empirical but not an essential self.<sup>16</sup> While it is true that there is no "immutable, non-composit, unconditioned, noumenal, absolute substance, exempt from the law of change and causality,"<sup>17</sup> the Buddha proclaimed:

To believe that the doer of the deed be the same as the one who experiences its result (in the next life): This is one extreme. To believe that the doer of the

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15. Stcherbatsky, Buddhist Logic, Vol. I, p. 5

16. cf. A Dictionary of Comparative Religion, Brandon (editor), p. 76 (contribution by T. O. Ling); Stcherbatsky, The Central Conception of Buddhism, pp. 21-22; Schumann, op. cit., p. 44

17. Dayal, op. cit., p. 74

deed, and the one who experiences its result, be two different persons: This is the other extreme. Both these extremes the Perfect One [the Buddha] has avoided, and taught the truth that lies in the middle of both . . . . 18

At issue here is the Buddhist teaching about rebirth, karma and, in general, the way in which the effects of one lifetime are perpetuated with some kind of continuity into subsequent lifetimes.

The Buddha, in the scripture quoted directly above, dealt with this issue by propounding the "paṭiccasamuppāda," usually referred to as the formula of dependent origination or conditioned origination. This is the series of states which follow each other, one after the other, in an endless cycle, the twelfth becoming the predecessor of the first. Thus:

Conditioned by (1) ignorance are the (2) karma-formations; conditioned by the karma-formations is (3) consciousness; conditioned by consciousness is (4) mind-and-body; conditioned by mind-and-body are (5) the six sense fields; conditioned by the six sense fields is (6) impression; conditioned by impression is (7) feeling; conditioned by feeling is (8) craving; conditioned by craving is (9) grasping; conditioned by grasping is (10) becoming; conditioned by becoming is (11) birth; conditioned by birth there come into being (12) aging and dying, grief, sorrow, suffering, lamentation and despair. Thus is the origin of this whole mass of suffering. 19

The Buddhist describes the relationship indicated by the "conditioned by" as a case of: "This being, that becomes; by

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18. Nidana Samyutta of Samyutta Nikaya, 46; Nyanatiloka, op. cit., p. 173

19. Vinaya-pitaka I, 1; Conze, Buddhist Texts Through the Ages, p. 66

the arising of this, that arises."<sup>20</sup> So long as the chain remains unbroken, just so long will it continue to produce itself, and it is the perpetual continuation of this chain which constitutes the rebirth cycle.

As a comment on the rebirth cycle which attempts to illuminate how it is that both rebirth and anatta are true (remaining faithful to the principles of anicca and dukkha at the same time), the paṭiccasamuppāda serves the limited purpose of providing a conceptual structure for a type of sequential continuity deprived, even as are the skandhas, of an essential unity such as that designated by the term "atta"--soul. In doing this the teaching of the paṭiccasamuppāda also illuminates the second and third truths of the Buddha's first sermon: The truth that "taṇhā" or craving accounts for dukkha; and the truth that the destruction or annihilation of taṇhā will end dukkha.<sup>21</sup>

Taṇhā, also translated as "thirst" or "desire" as well as "craving"<sup>22</sup> is the eighth in the list of the paṭiccasamuppāda, and by focusing on it in the manner in which the second and third truths do, the entire cycle of rebirths is seen as resulting from the fact of craving--"craving for lust, craving for becoming, craving for destruction."<sup>23</sup> The second truth therefore serves to focus the attention of the Buddhist upon one link in his chain of rebirths while the third truth affirms that to destroy it would be to end the entire cycle.

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20. Udana I, 1; Udana and Itivuttaka, Woodward (translator), p. 1

21. Nyanatiloka, op. cit., p. 159

22. e.g. Dayal, op. cit., pp. 239-242; Govinda, op. cit., p. 60; McGovern, op. cit., p. 175

23. Schumann, op. cit., p. 55



### The Eightfold Path

There remains of course, the manner of how *taṇhā* is to be ended and this constitutes the fourth and final truth: The eightfold path. Thus the Buddha taught that *samsara* is *dukkha*, *taṇhā* perpetuates that *dukkha*, to end *taṇhā* would therefore be to end *dukkha* and *taṇhā* can be ended by following the path of:

1. Right view
2. Right resolve
3. Right speech
4. Right conduct
5. Right livelihood
6. Right effort
7. Right mindfulness
8. Right meditation<sup>24</sup>

These are broken down into the three categories of wisdom (1 and 2), morality (3 through 5) and meditation (6 through 8)<sup>25</sup> --the three traditional areas in which the Buddhist understands he must develop. In them the Buddhist finds the rule by which he is to live just as the first three truths explain the need for this rule and the purpose it serves.

The effect of the fourth truth of the eightfold path is, necessarily, utterly pervasive throughout the entire life of the Buddhist. Thus the significance of his religion goes far beyond the acts of devotion represented by prayers, rituals and ceremonies. The eightfold path sets before him an ideal, internal and external, which he will attempt to realise insofar as the circumstances of his life allow.

In matters of wisdom he will progress with the growth of his understanding of the four truths and all that they entail,

24. Ibid., p. 68

25. Ibid.

although of course his knowledge and acceptance of the principles of dukkha, anicca and anatta in some preliminary way are prerequisites for they are the foundation of what the Buddhist believes is the right view of the world. Nor can he make the resolution implicit in the third and fourth truths (to end tanhā and thus dukkha by means of the eightfold path) apart from his apprehension of the compelling reasons for that resolution, as seen in the first two truths.

The ethics summarised by right speech, right action and conduct, and right livelihood are guided by five basic laws:

1. Ahimsa, or the law against the taking of life (all sentient beings are included).
2. The law against taking what is not given.
3. The law against sexual misbehaviour.
4. The law against all ill-mannered or unnecessary speech.
5. The law against liquors which cause mental inefficiency or deterioration.<sup>26</sup>

The monk must further abide by the rules of the Order (Sangha) and also must abide by an extended list of ten rather than five laws of abstinence and read the third law as a prohibition against all sexuality.<sup>27</sup>

Buddhist ethics however are not ultimately delineated by commandments so much as by the law of karma, a law of the physical universe with moral implications. Thus while the personality breaks up at death, the stream of karmic propensities flows on, bringing about new birth with its new

26. cf. Dayal, op. cit., pp. 199-204; Obeyesekere, "Theodicy, Sin and Salvation in a Sociology of Buddhism," Dialectic in Practical Religion, Leach (editor), p. 27; Nyanatiloka, op. cit., p. 44; Spiro, Buddhism and Society, p. 46
27. Spiro, Buddhism and Society, p. 46; Dayal, op. cit., pp. 199-204

personality and an environment somewhat the result of past karma; and ensuring that possibilities in the lifetime ahead will be effectively determined by that karma.

It should be remembered that the *paṭiccasamuppāda* cites ignorance as the condition for karmic formations. The Buddhist also names as the cause of karma, three phenomena or three "roots" ("hetu"): "Lobha" or greed; "dosa" or hatred, and "moha" or delusion.<sup>28</sup> These in effect are the most fundamental conditions of karma, and karma, as we have seen is the fundamental condition of the succeeding conditions which account for the cycles of rebirths. This teaching parallels that in the four truths, for it serves as another focus for breaking the cycle of rebirths, indicating that the Buddhist's path must eliminate these three "roots" or "hetu" of existence, and in so doing "root out" the causes of conditioned existence.

Karma insures the inevitability of justice being done, for all effects of all acts must, sooner or later, make their appearance. As effects can be good or bad, Buddhists speak of those which will result from good actions as merits and those which will result from bad actions as demerits. The implication of merit and demerit is twofold, however. In the strictest sense merit cannot of itself break the chain of karmically conditioned rebirths and thus it serves no final purpose to pile it up endlessly. On the other hand the achievements which will produce the Buddhist's final purpose may be unattainable until by virtue of his merit he is able to

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28. Govinda, *op. cit.*, p. 163

gain advantages which will make them easier to attain. Thus the Buddhist may seek to create merit and decrease demerit despite the fact that such an endeavour is only indirectly related to his ultimate goal.<sup>29</sup>

Karma then, emphasises the personal nature of merit and demerit as well as its imperishability,<sup>30</sup> underlining the continuity of each stream of rebirth cycles. Also, looked at from the other side, karma minimises the characteristics peculiar to this lifetime by placing the continuity in that which, strictly speaking, transcends the immediate individual. Egoism is therefore undermined, but responsibility is reinforced.

Despite the apparent inherent tendency toward determinism, the Buddhist does not believe it is implied by the law of karma, for it is not that one's karma determines one's behaviour, but that one's behaviour determines one's karma, which is important.<sup>31</sup> Nor is karma "the exclusive determinant of one's life-fate"<sup>32</sup> even insofar as one is the recipient of past effects. Responsibility more than anything else is indicated, and thus Stcherbatsky can speak of "Buddhist free will" as "a freedom inside the limits of necessity."<sup>33</sup> Karma is a determinant, but the teaching of the law of karma does not constitute a determinism.

29. Spiro, Buddhism and Society contains a lengthy discussion of the shifts in understanding and application of karma teaching. cf. especially p. 79

30. Dayal, op. cit., p. 190

31. Spiro, Buddhism and Society, p. 434

32. Ibid., p. 435

33. Stcherbatsky, Buddhist Logic, Vol. I, p. 134



Thus ethically, the Buddhist is guided by the abstentions of the general moral laws, but theoretically he understands that his behaviour with regard to his speech, action and livelihood, must be based on the task's nature: The removal of the root causes of existence. He must eradicate all greed, hatred and delusion, thus eradicating in the process all craving, ignorance, and ultimately, all karmic effects and propensities. Clearly, this is not just a rule of behaviour then, but a fundamental reformation of his deepest nature--a conversion of the very structures and forces which produced him.

#### Meditation

Not surprisingly therefore, the final category of the eightfold path commends meditation as a crucial aspect of Buddhist development. Right effort, right awareness (or mindfulness), and right meditation have to do with the Buddhist's use of his mind--not just for the avoidance of misuse but more significantly as an invaluable, essential and potent tool for his task. As the Buddhist is the first to realise, "truth is no easy thing to see,"<sup>34</sup> and thus the four truths and the teachings contained in them may be a beginning point as providing an initial right view and right resolve, but they must be fully integrated and understood experientially as well. In the latter sense they represent not only material which is cognised but a path for exploration of all the combined powers of the mind.

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34. Udana VIII, ii; Udana and Itivuttaka, Woodward (translator), p. 98

It is here that the issue of faith in Buddhism must be resolved, for while faith may constitute a significant part of the initial acceptance of the Buddhist's view of reality and of the resolution to undertake the task, its role should decline as meditation illumines and supports what was initially accepted with the aid of faith.<sup>35</sup> Thus we are told:

Well taught has the Lord the Dharma, it  
is verifiable, not a matter of time,  
inviting all to come and see, leading  
to Nirvana, to be known by the wise,  
each one for himself.<sup>36</sup>

Conze suggests that a Buddhist may accept the following things by faith:

1. The belief in karma and rebirth.
2. The basic teachings about the nature of reality.
3. Confidence in the three "refuges," the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.
4. Belief in the efficacy of the prescribed practices and in Nirvāṇa as the final way out of all difficulties.<sup>37</sup>

These can be objects of faith, however, only because they are propositions which "are grounded in the fact that the universe is the expression of certain laws" the truth of which one can ultimately prove to oneself.<sup>38</sup> As the fourth item indicates most clearly, acceptance of these involves the will and resolution to engage in the activity of verifying them--that is, to follow the eightfold path with its emphasis on meditation. Faith cannot finally be isolated from the process of certifying the truth and validity of its objects, therefore.

35. Ling, Buddha, Marx and God, p. 34

36. Visuddhimagga vii, 68; Conze, Buddhist Meditation, p. 49

37. Summarised from a passage by Conze in his Buddhist Thought in India, p. 48

38. Ling, Buddha, Marx and God, p. 18

Necessarily meditation is far more than just the consideration of reasons and reflection on convictions arising from those reasons, for that kind of activity "is placed on the same footing on epistemological grounds as faith, authority, or purely subjective considerations like likes or dislikes."<sup>39</sup> Rather in meditation, the mind becomes a laboratory for the testing of certain postulates--it becomes the context for the empirical verification of the truths taught.

The actual practice of meditation requires effort and discipline if it is to have the one-pointedness and other characteristics which will produce its most important effects, and it is to this fact that the fourth truth testifies when it speaks of right effort, mindfulness and meditation. Initial teaching therefore provides the structure for attaining the skills desired.

The task is twofold in learning to meditate. It is first a task of learning to use all the powers of the mind and it is secondly, a task of then using them toward full enlightenment. Typically the exercises reflect both aspects. Thus, as Ling points out:

An important part of the Buddhist practice of meditation is a relentless analysis of whatever has an appeal to the senses, and this harshly realistic attitude strikes one at first as providing a sharp and perhaps welcome contrast to the flattery and seduction of the senses.<sup>40</sup>

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39. Jayatilleke, Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge, p. 276

40. Ling, Buddha, Marx and God, p. 19

While disciplining the mind and its ability to concentrate and work, this analytical activity also sheds light on Buddhist theories about the person and the components of his existence.

Likewise the Buddhists devise lists of desirable objects of meditation and analysis, such as 26 aspects of the four truths, nine types of corpses (in various stages of decay), the four elements (earth, water, fire, air) and the colors (blue, yellow, red, white, light), or even something so abstract as "enclosed space."<sup>41</sup> Such meditations must always involve more than mental control and activity, for as Bloefeld points out:

. . . well-meant efforts will avail the adept nothing; either he succeeds in going some way toward negating the ego and breaking down the obstructions to the flow of intuitive wisdom, or he does not.<sup>42</sup>

If the meditation is not productive of this progress, it has failed in its purpose and no justification for it can be given. Meditation is not engaged in for ethical reasons but for epistemological and metaphysical ones.

Meditation is nevertheless ethically helpful, for it illumines the three bad roots and the way to their opposites. It also assists man in the control of his insatiable craving by bringing the full comprehension of its result to the fore, and thus inspires the resolution to end the cycle of rebirths. Due to his meditative achievements the Buddhist understands more deeply what his condition is, how it is to be ended and why, and such understanding forms the foundation of his external existence--speech, action and livelihood.

41. Conze, Buddhist Meditation, pp. 14 and 143

42. Bloefeld, The Way of Power, p. 172



Clearly, this is the level where ethics and meditation do meet, for ethics are concerned not just with acts, but with desires which instigate them as well<sup>43</sup>--or precisely with that which meditation can reform. However, meditation is primarily the producer of enlightenment, verifying the verbal and conceptual forms from the vast reservoir of experience which it provides. Secondly meditation is part of the conversion of the Buddhist which takes place progressively as he follows the eightfold path. Thus one might say that the purpose of meditation is scientific and the result is of both a theoretical and practical nature.

It would be natural at this point, however, to ask after the more general, social aspect of the Buddhist's conversion, for the net effect of our discussion of ethics and meditation and belief have made no mention thus far of what, in the West, has come to be called "our social responsibility." It must be apparent that the principles entailed in that phrase are not absent from the Buddhist vision of his task and life style, yet more specific aspects exist.

Meditation should ultimately result in behaviour which embodies the ethical laws and concerns, not just in doing good and living as intended, but in willing and desiring and reflecting certain profound psychological states (for they are more than what our term "attitude" generally connotes). Thus the Buddhist seeks to reverse his fundamental greed, hatred and delusion. Reversed he will see the world and himself as they

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43. Spiro, Buddhism and Society, pp. 47-48

are and live in accord with that vision, devoid of grasping desire, and embodying love.

Absence of desire, craving, grasping--greed--is what Buddhist detachment is all about. Detachment is never ethical indifference. On the contrary it is an ethical requisite. It is, most simply, the abandonment of all senses of ownership, the original delusion. Thus the Dhammapada says:

"These sons belong to me, and this wealth belongs to me," with such thoughts a fool is tormented. He himself does not belong to himself; how much less sons and wealth.<sup>44</sup>

Or we have the exclamation: "Let us live happily then, though we call nothing our own."<sup>45</sup> In its fullness such an attitude pervades everything in the Buddhist's existence and all of his relations--within himself and to what is outside of himself.

Thus we are taught:

"He abused me, he beat me, he defeated me, he robbed me,"--in those who harbour such thoughts hatred will never cease.

"He abused me, he beat me, he defeated me, he robbed me,"--in those who do not harbour such thoughts hatred will cease.<sup>46</sup>

As the latter quotation makes plain, there can be no lack of the ideal of love in the detachment of the Buddhist's renunciation of all ownership and all claims to his special relationships. Both love and non-ownership are to be paired to each other, for the Buddhist ideal of love allows no "special

44. Dhammapada V, 62; The Dhammapada, Babbitt (translator), p. 12

45. Dhammapada XV, 200; Ibid., p. 32

46. Dhammapada I, 3-4; Ibid., p. 3

relationships," envisioning rather the perfect, universal love such as the Christian "agape." The Buddhist sees this manifested in three forms: "Mettā," a loving-kindness or "generalised friendliness for all creatures;" "karuṇā," a compassion or pity for those who suffer (which indeed, all existent beings do as declared by the truth of dukkha); and "mudita," an empathetic joy or pleasure felt for the happiness of others.<sup>47</sup>

Thus Buddhism teaches not only that all sense of possession engenders hatred, but that love is a necessary counteraction: "For never does hatred cease by hatred here below; hatred ceases by love; this is the eternal law."<sup>48</sup> If one has no special attachment to anything, one cannot hate the cause of its eventual (and inevitable in one way or another) loss; just as one's love for all things will reflect one's deepest empathy with their dukkha--their own suffering, impermanence and non-possession of even themselves.

Ultimately, the combined operation of the principle of detachment and love means that:

The only thing that Buddhism can never be is a private affair, since in the Buddhist view there are no private individuals. The aim of Buddhism is inherently social in its concern; it is to bring all men to nirvāṇa; this objective concerns society as a whole.<sup>49</sup>

This is true of the whole of Buddhism despite the very different ways that it found expression in the various forms of the

47. Spiro, Buddhism and Society, p. 48

48. Dhammapada I, 5; The Dhammapada, Babbitt (translator), p. 3

49. Ling, Buddha, Marx and God, p. 83

religion, for it is the implicit fruit of the eightfold path, becoming explicit and inevitable on the higher stages of that path.

Needless to say, the Buddhist fully understands the seemingly unattainable nature of this ideal and vision. The end of the eightfold path where all eight are one; where beliefs, understandings, convictions, behaviour, lifestyle and all levels and facets of mind and consciousness are fully integrated, is not after all, the result of one lifetime of effort. Therefore we are told regarding the Dharma we have been discussing:

Just as . . . the mighty ocean flows down, slides and tends downward gradually, and there is no abrupt precipice, so also in this dhamma-discipline the training is gradual, the procedure is gradual; there is no abrupt penetration of knowledge.<sup>50</sup>

#### Nirvāṇa

Nirvāṇa--that which lies at the end of the eightfold path, inevitably proves to be more problematic than the other principles of Buddhism thus far. Partly this is because nirvāṇa cannot be the simple goal of the path. A goal is something for which one strives out of desire and nirvāṇa is rather the result of the achievement of what is more properly the Buddhist's goal: The destruction of ignorance and craving, the ending of the stream of rebirths, the eradication of greed, hatred and delusion. These are the things which properly must be done. To treat nirvāṇa as a goal would be to make it the

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50. Udāna V, v; Udāna and Itivuttaka, Woodward (translator), p. 65 (Dhamma is the Pali form of the Sanskrit Dharma)



object of desire and craving, to encourage its being treated as a reward, to make its occurrence impossible by preventing the proper conditions for it.

If one asks what Nirvāṇa is then, in the sense of asking the nature of the result of the Buddhist's achievement, one would find no satisfactory answer. In the Dictionary of Comparative Religion we are told that in its original sense and usage it was connected with the verb "nibbati" which means "to cool by blowing;" and the past participial form "nibbuta" was used to describe the Buddhist ideal man: "He who is cooled" (from the fever of greed, hatred and delusion).<sup>51</sup> This is reflected in the following scripture:

As flame blown out by wind goes to rest and is lost to cognizance, just so the sage who is released from name and body, goes to rest and is lost to cognizance.<sup>52</sup>

Perhaps the most famous scriptural references are those which state:

There is, monks, an unborn, not become, not made, un compounded, and were it not, monks, for this unborn, not become, not made, un compounded, no escape would be shown here for what is born, has become, is made, is compounded.<sup>53</sup>

Monks there exists that condition wherein is neither earth nor water nor fire nor air; wherein is neither the sphere of the infinite space nor of infinite consciousness nor of neither consciousness-nor-unconsciousness;

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51. Brandon (editor), A Dictionary of Comparative Religion, Item by T. O. Ling, p. 469

52. Suttanipāṭa 2069-2076; Conze, Buddhist Thought in India, p. 78

53. Udana 81; Conze, Buddhist Texts Through the Ages, p. 95

where there is neither this world  
nor a world beyond nor both together  
nor moon-and-sun. Thence monks, I  
declare is no coming to birth; thither  
is no going (from life); therein is no  
duration; thence is no falling; there  
is no arising. It is not something  
fixed, it moves not on, it is not  
based on anything. That indeed is  
the end of ill.<sup>54</sup>

If nothing else, these make it clear that nirvāna is not part  
of that existence characterised by the three marks--suffering,  
impermanence, soullessness--and this is sufficient to make  
Buddhism a soteriological religion offering salvation from  
continuance in these conditions. As Ninian Smart has observed,  
therefore:

All that is required for the doctrine  
of release is the individual's  
capacity for release. Thus in the  
Buddha's scheme of thought the possi-  
bility of nirvāna takes the place of  
the self.<sup>55</sup>

Because of the anatta doctrine it is clear that to the question  
"what or who then is saved?" the only answer which can be given  
is: "Nothing and nobody."<sup>56</sup> Salvation is then an ending of  
dukkha, anicca and anatta and allows one to say only that  
"there is no measure to him who has gone to rest; he keeps  
nothing that could be named," and thus "all paths of speech  
. . . are abolished."<sup>57</sup>

Needless to say, as with every retreat into ineffability,  
this makes the subject of nirvāna most problematic. Welbon's

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54. Udāna VIII, i; Udāna and Itivuttaka, Woodward (translator),  
p. 97; cf. Conze, Buddhist Texts Through the Ages,  
pp. 94-95

55. Smart, Doctrine and Argument in Indian Philosophy, p. 38

56. Conze, Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies, p. 45

57. Conze, Buddhist Thought in India, p. 79

excellent work on the efforts of Western interpreters to understand nirvāṇa is ample indication of this, and he cites Henry Thomas Colebrooke's statement of 1827:

It has been questioned whether annihilation, or what other condition short of such absolute extinction is meant to be described.<sup>58</sup>

Of this he says: "For more than a century and a quarter the question has remained for Western Europeans substantially as Colebrooke framed it."<sup>59</sup>

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58. Welbon, The Buddhist Nirvana and its Western Interpreters, p. 17

59. Ibid.

## CHAPTER 8: Specific Theravada Teachings

## The Dharma Theory

In the third section of the Pali canon, the Abhidharma, we have the development of the Theravada pluralistic metaphysics. Here "Buddhism discloses itself as a metaphysical theory developed out of one fundamental principle, viz. the idea that existence is an interplay of a plurality of subtle, ultimate, not further analysable elements of Matter, Mind and Forces."<sup>1</sup> These units "unite in the production of one stream (saṃtana) of events"<sup>2</sup> and it is this which constitutes the whole of our reality including ourselves. The name which the Buddhists gave to these "atoms" was "dharma," the same word as is used for the truth which the Buddha taught.

The dharma theory does not understand these units as existing for any period of time. Rather they arise and pass out of being "in the same instance" so to speak. Stcherbatsky used the words "point instance" for this "event" which each is. Thus the stream is composed not of on-going dharmas forming complex groupings in constant flux and change, but of complex groupings of dharmas which themselves are in constant flux and change. As Stcherbatsky puts it:

Thus a moment becomes a synonym of an element (dharma), two moments are two different elements. An element becomes something like a point in time-space . . . . It, nevertheless, admittedly represents the smallest particle of time imaginable.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Stcherbatsky, The Central Conception of Buddhism, p. 60
  2. Ibid., p. 8
  3. Ibid., p. 31



Stcherbatsky also approves one Buddhist formulation that "the momentary thing represents its own annihilation."<sup>4</sup>

Under analysis the dharmas are seen as fundamentally timeless, spaceless and motionless:

But it is timeless not in the sense of an eternal being, spaceless not in the sense of an ubiquitous being, motionless not in the sense of an all-embracing motionless whole, but it is timeless, spaceless and motionless in the sense of having no duration, no extension and no movement, it is a mathematical point-instant, the moment of an action's efficiency.<sup>5</sup>

Thus the formula "no substance, no duration, no other bliss than in nirvana" recognises anicca as applicable to the final and most basic and specific elements of existence and not just to the general impermanence of human life and the objects of the empirical world.<sup>6</sup>

This theory of Instantaneous Being<sup>7</sup> has, as one might expect, intricate development which fills volumes. Nevertheless we shall confine ourselves to three aspects which merit our attention here. First is the effect upon the interpretation of the paṭiccasamuppāda. Stcherbatsky writes of "the meaning of elements' operation together with others" in this way:

This concerted life of the elements is but another name for the laws of causation--the combined origination of some elements with regard to other elements. Thus it is that the fundamental idea of Buddhism--the conception of a plurality of separate elements--includes the idea of the most

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4. Stcherbatsky, Buddhist Logic, Vol. I, p. 95 (from Santiraksita)  
 5. Ibid., p. 87  
 6. Ibid., p. 109  
 7. Ibid., p. 79

strict causality controlling their operation in the world-process. The "theory of elements" . . . means that "if something appears, such and such will follow."<sup>8</sup>

It is therefore the case that the instantaneous elements were "linked together in an individual life only by the laws of causal interdependence" (paṭiccasamuppāda),<sup>9</sup> and the paṭiccasamuppāda thus represents immutable cosmic laws which form the basis of the endless cycles of lives.

The teaching of the paṭiccasamuppāda serves to develop the nature of the relationships between dharmas and to guarantee an order to the sequence of dharmas. It tells us what type of dharmas will occur after a given previous type. This of course refers to those conglomerates or streams which constitute sentient beings and a clarification of rebirth can be made from this development as well as of soullessness. The individual is thus never an individual, but an unbroken succession of dharmas arising according to predetermined laws in a cycle which cannot be arbitrarily broken or discontinued. The dharma theory drives home the pathos of the three marks by the consistency with which it applies impermanence, soullessness and the resultant suffering.

The second aspect of development of the dharma-theory which requires our attention is that of epistemology and psychology. Dharmas which have to do with what we would call "mind" are called "cittas" and "are to be regarded as following upon one another in lightning succession within the

8. Stcherbatsky, The Central Conception of Buddhism, pp. 23-24

9. Stcherbatsky, Buddhist Logic, Vol. I, p. 93

stream of consciousness;" and as such are a manifestation of a reaction "to events . . . or impressions received from outside."<sup>10</sup> Groups of cittas will form "the bare element into which a thought complex may ultimately be resolved" and this is called a "cetasika."<sup>11</sup> Cetasikas in turn "are present in varying numbers and combinations in every one of the possible states of consciousness."<sup>12</sup>

Theravada Buddhists have gone to great length to classify and describe the states of consciousness, being particularly interested in such questions as whether they demonstrate greed, hatred and delusion or their opposites and whether they were productive of merit, demerit, or were karmically neutral. Some of these states, it was believed, could arise only on a higher plane than that at which the ordinary consciousness of man operates, but all of them lend themselves finally to analysis as a stream of dhammas.<sup>13</sup>

Still, how the states of consciousness condition each other and are conditioned was a major concern of the Abhidharma which developed its own method for analysis and the investigation of relations.<sup>14</sup> In its epistemological and psychological speculation the goal and purpose was not forgotten. Thus the ending of the flow of a stream of dhammas remains always at the forefront and the result is a particular understanding of the task in light of the dharma theory. This simply consisted of

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10. Ling, Buddhism and a Mythology of Evil, p. 34

11. Aung, Compendium of Philosophy, p. 237

12. Ling, Buddhism and a Mythology of Evil, p. 34

13. Aung, op. cit., p. 8; Govinda, op. cit., p. 134

14. Ling, Buddhism and the Mythology of Evil, p. 35

the conscious production of those states of consciousness which are karmically neutral or positive. As one might anticipate, the highest states of consciousness are more advantageous and can be produced in meditation on the level of ordinary existence.

Psychologically then, the task is to control and direct the states of consciousness which arise, and while meditation techniques are designed to do exactly this, all reactions to external stimuli come under the same purpose. The Buddhists could not confine their attention to the fully developed cetasika but must understand in the minutest detail the relationship between the object and subject in sensation and perception.

Analysis applied to this area resulted in a 6 x 3 fold division: Six types of objects, six types of sense organs, six types of resultant sense consciousness. Thus these are:

1. The six types of objects:  
Visual, audio, olfactory, taste  
producing, tactile, mental.
2. The six sense organs: Eye,  
ear, nose, tongue, body, mind.
3. The six types of consciousness:  
Sight, sound, smell, taste, touch  
and thought.<sup>15</sup>

Categorisation of the senses and their objects (the first two groups) in this manner is spoken of as the "ayatana" which function within the understanding of the skandhas as already discussed.

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15. cf. Conze, Buddhist Thought in India, pp. 108-109;  
Stcherbatsky, The Central Conception of Buddhism, p. 13



If the skandhas are viewed in light of the dharma theory, they can be seen as "groups of constituent factors" or "a series of momentary events, each such event standing in a causal relationship to the next."<sup>16</sup> They can also be seen as reflecting various levels and types of complexity of dharma streams. Thus one commentator classes the fifth skandha, consciousness, as a flow of simple, basic cittas--a pure consciousness--and the second, third and fourth skandhas (sensation, perception and mental phenomena) as cetasikas; while another commentator will understand all five skandhas as representing a growing degree of complexity and thus all be considered cetasikas or even groups of cetasikas.<sup>17</sup>

The third and final aspect of the dharma theory which we must consider is that of nirvāṇa and the understanding of it which develops in this system. To understand nirvāṇa in this way it will help to point out that the dharmas we have discussed thus far have been characterised by impermanence and, when lumped in "composite products of existence," they may be called "dhātu." This word has been used in three ways:

1. For the macro-composites of the three planes of existence in Buddhist cosmology: The kāma-dhātu, the rūpa-dhātu and the arūpa-dhātu.
2. The six "mahabhūtas" of earth, air, fire, water, space, consciousness.
3. The eighteen phenomenal elements (i.e. the six objects, six senses and six consciousnesses).<sup>18</sup>

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16. Brandon (editor), A Dictionary of Comparative Religion, item by T. O. Ling, p. 76  
 17. McGovern, op. cit., pp. 92-93; Murti, op. cit., p. 349; Dayal, op. cit., pp. 69-72  
 18. Streng, op. cit., pp. 56-57

Always it represents a related stream of dharmas or the amassing of inter-related streams into incredibly complex units of grouping. Some, as one can see from the above listing of uses, will be of the type empirically known as "matter" and some of the type known as "mind." Together, they include some of the most popular and easily grasped analyses of what constitutes the world, of what goes to make it up.

The dharmas which make up dhātu are, as we have said, impermanent and conditioned, or "saṃskṛta," and by contrast, Theravada dharma-theory says, the dharma of nirvāṇa is asaṃskṛta--i.e. permanent and unconditioned.<sup>19</sup> By this theory, nirvāṇa is a dharma as is everything real, it is "an element, a thing,"<sup>20</sup> and "a separate entity (dharma)."<sup>21</sup> However it is wholly unlike the dhātu dharmas for it is:

. . . reckoned as beyond these worlds,  
 . . . to be realised through the  
 knowledge belonging to the Four paths.  
 It is the object of those paths, and of  
 their fruits. It is called nirvāṇa in  
 that it is a "departure" from that  
 craving which is called vana, lusting.  
 This nirvāṇa is in its nature single,  
 but for purposes of logical treatment,  
 it is twofold, namely the element of  
 nirvāṇa, wherewith is yet remaining  
 stuff of life, and the element of  
 nirvana without that remainder. So,  
 too, when divided into modes, it is  
 threefold--namely, Void, Signless, and  
 Absolute Content.<sup>22</sup>

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19. Murti, op. cit., p. 344. There are in fact three asaṃskṛta dharmas cited usually: "Space (ākāśa), nirvāṇa, and the cessation of elements due to lack of favorable conditions."

20. Stcherbatsky, Buddhist Logic, Vol. I, p. 507

21. Murti, op. cit., p. 354

22. Aung, op. cit., p. 168. The Four Paths are the four conditions known as the Stream-Entrant, the Once-Returner, the Non-Returner, and the Saint; having to do with whether or not and if so how a man will be reborn. cf. Schumann, op. cit., p. 126

When the condition of "absolute calm," when "all cooperation [the formation of composites by saṃskṛta dharmas] is extinct and replaced by immutability (asaṃskṛta = nirvāṇa)," is achieved, the eternal dharma of nirvāṇa remains.<sup>23</sup>

In Theravada development it is in this context that one can best understand the term "saṃsāra" which is usually used in speaking of "the world" in contrast to "nirvāṇa." In posing these two against each other in this manner however, it must be remembered that saṃsāra is made up of dharmas and nirvāṇa is also a dharma--albeit qualitatively different from the dharmas of saṃsāra.

The Theravada dharma theory utilises the vision of each man, through his own knowledge, behaviour and meditative skill, working his way toward that point when no rebirth-causing defilements are to be found in the groupings and groupings of groupings of dharmas which make him up. At this point the unique dharma of nirvāṇa is understood to characterise his achievement. Unlike the dharmas of which a man is composed, it is not characterised by dukkha, anicca and anatta. Also nirvāṇa admittedly by virtue of this, qualifies as "wholly other," but a wholly other which is wholly impersonal, simple, unrelated and also a dharma.

The dharma theory is realistic, but in much the same way as an atomic theory is realistic: The dharmas themselves are real. Things which are conglomerates of dharma streams are not real ultimately, and their appearance as things real in their

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23. Stcherbatsky, The Central Conception of Buddhism, p. 61

own right is therefore deceptive. Because of, and in the context of the dharma theory, therefore, the phenomenal world and man himself can be spoken of as illusory.<sup>24</sup>

### The Buddha and the Religious Life

The Buddha, first and foremost, can be portrayed "as a 'saviour' in the strictly limited sense that he had discovered the doctrine (dharma) which, if properly applied, must without any doubt lead to salvation."<sup>25</sup> The limitation on the word "saviour" is thus twofold: First in that the Buddha's aid is characterised by his discovery which constitutes a human achievement and secondly in that the Buddha's discovery is, to use a Buddhist image, an aid to a "safe crossing" (i.e. of the "ocean" or "flood" or saṃsāra) which is neither essential to other's crossings nor unique--theoretically. That is, any man has the potential by virtue of his humanity "to make a safe crossing" by his own efforts and discoveries, and it is witness to precisely this truth that the phenomena of the Buddha's own safe crossing stand.

This individualism and adequacy of the individual is a consistent stream in Buddhist thought and the force of the teaching and belief is best observed in the last words of the Buddha, when shortly before his death he directed his followers: "Work out your salvation with diligence."<sup>26</sup> Spiro puts this principle well when he writes that "everyone, as the Buddha put it, must seek his own salvation (with diligence); no

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24. Stcherbatsky, Buddhist Logic, Vol. I, p. 507

25. Conze, Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies, p. 40

26. MahāParinibbana Suttanta vi, 7; Spiro, Buddhism and Society, p. 213



one else--not even the Buddha--can save him."<sup>27</sup> It was to this that Mrs. Rhys Davids addressed herself when she wrote:

The Buddhist sought in his discipline to attain, not union with a deity, but supernormal vision and power in himself. Whether man, and woman, originally made gods in their own image or not, the Buddhist--the Indian generally--hold the human mind and will to be potentially god-like. Given the right antecedents and the right training, to man belonged the powers that had been projected into deities. Thus do we see, in the complex ideal of Arahantship, or nirvāṇa-under-present-conditions, a super-normal evolution of faculties combined with, not to say resulting from ethical purity.<sup>28</sup>

The arahant referred to here is one who has been aided in the task of working out his own salvation by the Buddha's teaching. The dynamic of the relationship is demonstrated by the following lines from Buddhist Scripture:

The Disciple:

Alone, without support, O Shakyam,  
I am unable to cross the great flood.  
Tell me the objective support,  
O All-seeing One,  
Leaning on which I could cross that  
flood.

The Buddha:

Mindfully discerning the "nothing-  
whatever-anywhere,"  
Supported by the conviction "it is  
not," you will cross  
Having forsaken sense-desire,  
refrain from talk,  
Look to the extinction of craving  
by day and night.<sup>29</sup>

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27. Spiro, Buddhism and Society, p. 61 (cf. Dhammapada XII, 165-166)  
28. n. Mrs. Rhys Davids "Introduction" to Compendium of Philosophy, Aung, p. xx  
29. Sutanipāṭa 1069-1076; Conze, Buddhist Thought in India, p. 77 (the term "Shakyam" is a title for the Buddha referring to his tribal connections)

In his feeling that he cannot cross alone the disciple is confessing his ordinary condition, for in Theravada Buddhism it is accepted that those who achieve enlightenment without aid are very rare indeed. Thus even from the context of Theravada thought, Conze could not be faulted in his analysis of the Buddha to the effect that:

It is true that to win enlightenment the Buddha used only resources which are open to all humans and not beyond the capacity of human nature as such, and that his powers are supernormal merely because they are based on highly developed moral purification and mental concentration. But though the Buddha was a human being, he was certainly a most extraordinary one.<sup>30</sup>

The difference between ordinary and extraordinary thus has to do with the level of development which the disciple has achieved and this in turn has to do with the qualities which he possesses and the life conditions in which he finds himself. Because of the Buddhist belief in rebirth, personal or environmental limitations which prevent enlightenment in this lifetime do not qualify as final and absolute barriers to enlightenment. Thus the disciple may readily admit that in this lifetime he has no hope of making the crossing without help and in that admission not be denying the belief that man is capable of making the crossing without help or that even with the help the final fact of the crossing being made is the result ultimately of the individual's own efforts.

The basic truth of the individual's sufficiency and self-responsibility is scripturally reaffirmed:

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30. Conze, Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies, p. 39

By oneself the evil is done, by  
oneself one is defiled. Purity  
and impurity belong to oneself,  
no one can purify another. <sup>31</sup>

Thus the Buddha is understood as having come to enlightenment without the assistance of the Dharma, that body of teaching which he himself formulated after his enlightenment and left to serve those taking the same path he had followed. As a Buddha he differs from his followers who achieve enlightenment in this respect, and that difference is preserved in the different titles: Buddha and arahant.

The difference between Buddha and arahant is also preserved in the attitude toward the Buddha, the place accorded to his memory, and the role which his image plays in the disciple's own efforts. To recognise this is to pass beyond the consideration of the Buddha's humanity and the difficulty in, but potential of, others duplicating his extraordinary achievement, and to enter that tenuous area of the religious symbol and concept, of faith and devotion. The basis of this extension is the result of the belief that the term Buddha generally incorporates two further differences from the arahant: 1) In the extent of the abilities and skills developed and 2) in the use of those powers (including the powers of insight and understanding by which the historical Buddha created the body of his teachings) to assist others.

Buddhist "salvation" in terms of the image of the crossing does not require all the skills and powers which can be attained in its quest--some being unessential to that

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31. Dhammapada XIII, 165; The Dhammapada, Babbitt (translator), p. 27

achievement but possible by-products of pursuing it. One who attains to the minimal for enlightenment and freedom from rebirth-causing defilements is an arahant but one who goes beyond to master the whole, is a Buddha. If the Buddha does not use these powers to assist others, he is a "solitary" (sometimes translated "silent") Buddha and if he does use them to assist others, he is a "perfect" Buddha.<sup>32</sup> While the former does not function as an ideal, Spiro tells us that he found where "there has been a long tradition of aspiration to Buddhahood, the aspiration is for [perfect] , rather than [solitary] Buddhahood."<sup>33</sup>

In Theravada Buddhism however, the notion that one might become a perfect Buddha is a notion which "staggeres the imagination," reflecting an almost unimaginable hubris.<sup>34</sup> Buddhahood is a remote possibility the remoteness of which is magnified by the humble realisation of the Buddhist that it is great good fortune and achievement to even have been born as a human--for "most rebirths occur in the four 'states of woe' (animal, demon, ghost, and hell)."<sup>35</sup> Other rebirths than these four states constitute the "five rarities" which are: 1) Becoming a Buddha, 2) hearing the preaching of a Buddha, 3) becoming a monk, 4) becoming a righteous man, and 5) simply being born as a human.<sup>36</sup>

There is then, a tradition that while becoming a Buddha is possible, it is neither essential nor likely, and the result is

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32. Spiro, Buddhism and Society, p. 60

33. Ibid., p. 62

34. Ibid., pp. 62-63

35. Ibid., p. 67

36. Ibid.



to maximise the significance of the Buddha's accomplishment and the meaning of the state he achieved. Most immediately this means that the Buddha becomes an object of devotion although, as Conze has pointed out, "a Buddhist's devotions are not so much petitions to a God, but a means by which he renews his own courage and confidence."<sup>37</sup> In this context the prime significance of the Buddha is that he, as a man, achieved what the devotee desires to achieve; and even beyond that, the devotee has the advantage of the Buddha's teachings to aid him on the path which the Buddha had himself needed to traverse without that aid. If there are those moments when even the Buddhist is tempted to think that the state he seeks is unattainable, the Buddha is then the guarantor of its reality and feasibility. Here, of course, we refer to the state of arahantship and not Buddhahood which incorporates but passes beyond it.

Not surprisingly the Buddhist speaks in the most honorific terms of Buddhahood and the Buddha, as for example:

The Lord is truly the Arahant, fully enlightened, perfect in his knowledge and conduct, well-gone, world-knower, supreme, leader of men to be tamed, teacher of gods and men, the Buddha, the Lord.<sup>38</sup>

The references here to "gods" denotes the inhabitants of a plane (or planes) of existence parallel to, above, and different from our own plane in the same sense in which the Buddhist "hell" is a plane of existence parallel to, below and different from our own. The many postulated planes in Buddhist cosmology and the

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37. Conze, Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies, p. 40

38. cf. Majjhima Nikāya i, 37; Anguttara Nikāya iii, 285; Visuddhimagga vii, 2; Conze, Buddhist Meditation, p. 45

beings which inhabit them are of no theoretical importance at this point as they all are part of samsāra and share the fundamental characteristics of it, thus requiring eventually the same salvation or escape represented in the goal which men seek. Thus the image of the Buddha going to the planes on which the gods reside to teach them is comparable to the Christian image of Christ's descent into hell to preach to its inhabitants.

As an object of devotion, the Buddhist may also engage in rituals and rites centered on the Buddha, as, for example, the water libation rite in which water is poured drop by drop from a glass to a vase while a proper recitation is made,<sup>39</sup> or by a common Buddhist prayer such as the following:

I beg leave! I beg leave! I beg Leave!  
By act, by word, and by thought, I raise  
my hands in reverence to the forehead  
and worship, honor, look at, and humbly  
pay honor to the Three Gems--The Buddha,  
the Dharma, and the Sangha--one time,  
two times, three times, O Lord.<sup>40</sup>

As illustrated by this prayer, the Buddha forms a kind of trinity with the body of truth Buddhists believe to be his teaching (the Dharma) on the one hand and the group of men and women who seek to embody that teaching and to devote themselves to the path toward enlightenment (the Sangha), on the other.

It is significant that probably the most universally shared prayer which is also something of a confession of faith among Buddhists is the simple:

39. Spiro, Buddhism and Society, p. 213

40. Ibid., p. 210

I take refuge in the Buddha,  
 I take refuge in the Dharma,  
 I take refuge in the Sangha. 41

All three share the status of the Buddhist's source of strength, encouragement and inspiration, and in their union the perspective with which each is viewed individually should become apparent. As Spiro notes, the rituals of Buddhism are properly "essentially expressive and commemorative in character"<sup>42</sup> within the context thus far developed, and this simple formula--profound in its effect on the devotee seeking thereby to direct his attention more intently upon the task before him--captures this.

#### Theism and Theology

Precisely because Theravada Buddhism is a religious tradition and not just a philosophy, thus possessing myths, marvellous beings, and many profoundly symbolic materials which do not lend themselves readily to logical or reasonable explication, the matter of its atheism is not perhaps so clear as our summary so far would suggest. R. F. Gombrich after observing Buddhism in Sri Lanka, for example, stated that while a definition of religion "which equates religion with theism" may be controversial "on the cognitive level," it nevertheless holds on the affective level.<sup>43</sup> In making this point he intended to follow Spiro who had written:

I would argue that the belief in superhuman beings and in their power to assist or to harm man approaches universal distribution, and this

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41. Ibid., p. 193

42. Ibid.

43. Gombrich, Precept and Practice, p. 9

belief--I would insist--is the core variable which ought to be designated by any definition of religion.<sup>44</sup>

Several difficulties emerge in this development from the point of view of this thesis. First and foremost, we have taken the position that "theism" should be reserved for that specific theological development represented by orthodox Christian, Jewish and Islamic belief about God, and should on no account be confused with the belief in superhuman beings which might well be designated as "gods." The Buddha as a man who achieved nirvāṇa can on no account be equated with the God of theism, and nirvāṇa, while in some ways reminiscent of theistic formulations, does not stand in relationship to saṃsāra as the God of theism stands in relation to the world.

Secondly, we would not make the belief in superhuman beings an essential to the definition of religion, but regard it rather as one of the types of material which go to make up a religious tradition. In Theravada Buddhism the belief in the Buddha might very well be of a nature which does not even see him as "superhuman" but rather as a highly inspirational symbol and excellent model.

On the other hand we must agree with John Bloefeld when he complains that:

The notion of a religion founded by a human being whose achievements resulted from his own effort appealed to Western rationalists and agnostics of the late nineteenth century, who seemed to have ignored or failed to

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44. Spiro, "Problems of Definition and Explanation," Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion, Banton (editor), p. 94



grasp the other significations of the word "Buddha" and to have transmitted an incomplete account of its meaning.<sup>45</sup>

Yet if Gombrich tends to equate a theology (belief in gods herein intended as its classical meaning) with theism, Spiro tends to equate "extraordinary" with "superhuman." Thus he describes the Buddha as superhuman because "unlike ordinary humans, he himself acquired the power to attain enlightenment and, hence, Buddhahood."<sup>46</sup> Doubtless the Buddha was extraordinary insofar as, according to Spiro, by his Buddhahood:

. . . he showed others the means for its enlightenment's attainment. Without his teachings, natural man could not, unassisted, have discovered the way to enlightenment and to final release.<sup>47</sup>

Yet Spiro is wrong to equate this with superhuman and he may be wrong in not recognising the possibility of unassisted attainment depending upon what he means by "natural man" (for such unassisted enlightenment does represent the end of a phenomenal evolution).

Precisely what the Buddha is believed to be or regarded as on a deeply devotional level, may vary radically, and even among Theravada believers such terms as "superhuman" or "god" may be appropriate. Likewise one might even speak of Buddhist "theology" when considering its mythology of gods and heavens and of "Buddhology" when speaking of the various meanings which may be given to the Buddha. One might also regard nirvāṇa as "the sacred reality" and speak of its attainment as "salvation."

45. Bloefeld, op. cit., p. 63

46. Spiro, "Problems of Definition and Explanation," op. cit., p. 92

47. Ibid.

In the end however, the proper assignment of these words so common to the study of religion, must be done in such a manner as to preserve important differences, such as traditional Buddhist atheism in contrast to traditional Christian theism.

A summary of Theravada belief should help to make even more explicit the fundamental structural difference between the two systems. Thus it should be emphasised that the Theravada Buddhist sees the world--saṃsāra--as characterised by suffering, impermanence and soullessness. Man is identified wholly with this saṃsāra which means that there is nowhere for him to go and no way for him to be other than in and of saṃsāra.

The Dharma offers the Buddhist an interpretation of saṃsāra and commends a style of life and set of values consistent with this interpretation. These are designed to overcome suffering and ultimately bring to a wholly natural end the stream of samsaric reality which each man is. In this sense the system is not world-negating. As saṃsāra is man's sole reality (there is no "other world" for him to go to) and the setting for his proper life, it is affirmed. In this sense man is offered a meaningful way to be a man and one cognisant of that reality which is not samsaric--nirvāṇa.

The Buddhist, in following the way which the Dharma makes clear, is given the tools of meditation as a form of empiricism designed both to help him actualise the recommended way of being and to validate the original understanding of saṃsāra expounded. Likewise in his interpersonal relations he is advised on the most advantageous and proper internal state for them to be rooted in.

Indeed, it is probably most correct to think of Theravada Buddhism as a way for living in the world to the fullest potential which such a reality contains rather than as a way of escaping the world. This is clearly demonstrated by the artistic representations of the Buddha which as often--if not more often--show him in a teaching position (mudra) as they show him quietly seated in one of the higher planes of meditation. The Theravada way of life seeks to absorb, analyse, control and integrate the totality of that reality available to man rather than to ignore, sublimate or reject that reality.

Nirvāṇa represents first of all the summit of this process of right understanding, behaviour and self-control. Coincidental with its attainment is the cessation of those factors which would have produced new life forms. Thus nirvāṇa represents also this cessation or the condition of being free from all rebirth-causing defilements. Finally, nirvāṇa in Theravada thought, represents a kind of reality which is not samsaric and thus is not characterised by suffering, soullessness and impermanence.

The situation of the arahant who has attained nirvāṇa is clearly problematic. He will die--the final actualisation of his own impermanence and soullessness. He will also, prior to that death, be subject to suffering. Yet his life in this state will represent a form of existence which is the aim of all Buddhist endeavour and which embodies the maximum potential of saṃsāra and its "marks." In this, something which is just as real as saṃsāra but is not of saṃsāra and its impermanent individuals, is also recognisable.

## CHAPTER 9: The Mahayana System

## A Fundamental Reworking

Mahayana represents a fundamentally different treatment of Buddhist materials from that of the Theravada and while its roots may go back to the earliest divisions in the Sangha, its later developments so often display such an overt and self-conscious polemic against the Theravada that it is difficult not to see it as primarily a later reaction to the fully developed Theravada system. Such a view is however only partially correct and must be adjusted through a realisation that the philosophical differences between the two are accompanied by differences of far deeper roots and far more subtle nature.

At any rate the Mahayana came to understand even the Four Truths in an essentially different manner than did the Theravada. Thus suffering come to be regarded as an illusion,<sup>1</sup> and anatta is formulated in terms of *nairātmya*--the denial of substance. The first truth is understood as of the kind of Absolute Truth, but the remaining three, including the eightfold path which constitutes the fourth, as of the kind of truth "as conventionally believed in common parlance."<sup>2</sup> This means that the first truth as a verbal formulation is highly symbolic and the subsequent three are deprived of the authority and high regard which they are accorded by the Theravada. Indeed even such basic formulas as are represented by the *skandha*, the *aya-tana* and the *dhātu* undergo a far-reaching re-evaluation.

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1. Schumann, op. cit., p. 91

2. Murti, op. cit., pp. 244 and 252



# Śūnyatā

At the heart of this other system are the prajñā-pāramitā texts and the works of the Madhyamika school--especially those of one Nagarjuna. The key to Nagarjuna's presentation of the Buddhist truth, and an outgrowth of the prajñā-pāramitā conceptions which preceeded it, is the concept of "śūnyatā" or "emptiness," and this proposition assumed proportions in Mahayana life and thought as central as was the concept of dharmas to Theravada.

Essentially, śūnyatā applies most immediately to the dharmas. When the Theravada development made these but momentary--passing out of being even as they came into being, they already incorporated an insubstantiality and elusiveness not utterly remote from what Nagarjuna and the Madhyamikas were to say about them. This was: The dharmas themselves are unreal, for they are relative and void in their nature, themselves perishable objects which never achieve full being.<sup>3</sup> They are empty of reality as they are empty of the permanence and substance beingness would imply. In the final analysis, they are not, therefore.

However, if the dharmas are śūnyatā and themselves ultimately unreal and non-existent, the immediate question is: What is real, what does exist? To this the reply was consistent: Everything is śūnya (empty). The Madhyamikas "completely denied the existence of the world and the dharmas,"<sup>4</sup> but in the sense of showing up "their real nature as devoid of

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3. cf. Stcherbatsky, Buddhist Logic, Vol. I, p. 537; Murti, op. cit., pp. 7-13

4. McGovern, op. cit., p. 21

essence" rather than as their nullification.<sup>5</sup> Thus the separate dharmas are "illusory" and like empirical reality must be accepted as not ultimate.<sup>6</sup> Stated simply:

The insight that all things are "empty" means that things have phenomenal reality through their interrelation, and not because they "express" or "reflect" an absolute essence of a thing which exists somewhere.<sup>7</sup>

The paṭiccasamuppāda was taken in this light not to refer to a sequence in the dharmic flow, but to the universal interrelation or, put otherwise, the utter relativity of all phenomena. It told the Mahayana that nothing was real by itself because everything was relative to something else and could never be isolated from and identified apart from those relations. As Nagarjuna said: "Neither of those things is established (as real) which cannot be conceived either as identical or different from each other,"<sup>8</sup> and as the paṭiccasamuppāda prevented such conception by showing that all is relative, everything was śūnya.<sup>9</sup>

To press the significance of this, however, is to realise that there is no simple statement of śūnyatā. For one thing, it must be recognised that it assumes an absoluteness, for "it has to include within its scope, not only all modes of being, but also modes of value and of speculative thought; it has to include itself too to be consistent and complete."<sup>10</sup> Thus phenomena are śūnya because, being relative, they lack

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5. Murti, op. cit., p. 97

6. cf. Conze, Buddhist Thought in India, pp. 224-225; Murti, op. cit., p. 251

7. Streng, op. cit., p. 143

8. Madhyamika Karikas II, 21 and XIX, 6; Murti, op. cit., p. 137

9. Murti, op. cit., pp. 136-140

10. Ibid., p. 356

substantiality or independent reality, but the absolute is śūnya also because it is devoid of empirical forms and no thought category or predicate may be applied to it.<sup>11</sup> Śūnyatā is thus all-embracing.

The scope of the teaching runs danger only of underemphasis, and it is not too much to say that śūnyatā "is both the true understanding of existence and the expression of the true nature of existence which is without an ultimate ground."<sup>12</sup> It thus represents both a kind of metaphysics and an epistemology based upon a dialectical criticism of reality. In regard to the former therefore, we see Mahayana through the Madhyamikan development, crystalising around what can be stated in the form of three assertions:

1. That there are no elements (dharmas).
2. That there is one motionless whole.
3. That there is "complete equipollency between the empirical world and the Absolute, between Saṃsāra and Nirvāṇa."<sup>13</sup>

Finally, then, "the Absolute, or nirvana, is nothing but the world viewed sub specie aeternitatis."<sup>14</sup>

By the same token the universe is "one motionless whole" because śūnyatā prevents anything from originating and disappearing in it, even as it prevented real dharmas in its recognition that relativity does not allow an ultimate reality to the parts.<sup>15</sup> Śūnyatā effectively reduces Theravada plurality of dharmas to Mahayana monism. Nirvāṇa is no more a

11. Ibid., p. 349

12. Streng, op. cit., pp. 156-157

13. Stcherbatsky, Buddhist Logic, Vol. I, pp. 8-10

14. Ibid., p. 10

15. Ibid., p. 9

separate real entity, an eternal dharma, but one form in which the absolute reality of śūnyatā appears.

All of this is, the Buddhist insists, "beyond the grasp of intellectual comprehension and verbal expression."<sup>16</sup> Realising the emptiness of everything does not lend itself to conceptualisation or description. Ultimately it is a transcendent and mystical truth which man can only grasp through an intuitive experience using and reflecting a unique kind of insight--called "prajñā." Śūnyatā as the basis for a dialectical criticism of reality may serve to negate all claims to being which the phenomena inspire, but fully grasping the limitlessness of this dialectic, which declares the śūnya nature of even śūnyatā, lies beyond the rational and intellectual skills of the thinking mind.

The difficulty is that shared by all monistic systems. The effective unification of all polarities (e.g. production/destruction, reality/non-reality, saṃsāra/nirvāṇa, that-which-is-bound-to-the-chain-of-rebirths/that-which-has-gained-spiritual-release) negates many "cherished antipathies" and empties religious ideals "of self-established nature and characteristics."<sup>17</sup> The mind feels itself confronted by a challenge in taking up such an understanding which is at least as great as the challenge of total detachment--the challenge of something alien to the natural understanding and interpretive activities of man.

16. Conze, Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies, p. 77

17. Streng, op. cit., pp. 45 and 86



Likewise in recognising that śūnyatā means that "no radical bifurcation of the two planes of reality--the phenomenal and the absolute"<sup>18</sup> may be allowed, the Madhyamikan created for himself the task of comprehending the resultant ultimate synthesis. It was then a matter not just of retraining the understanding but of expanding it. Also, as Streng has emphasised, "To know 'emptiness' was to realise emptiness" and thus to be free oneself from the illusion of the empirical and phenomenal.<sup>19</sup> While bound to that illusion one "experiences" suffering, impermanence, and soullessness, but śūnyatā is a purely soteriological term,<sup>20</sup> in that it incorporates the secret of salvation from them.

Conze notes that "as a practical term 'emptiness' means the complete denial or negation of this world by the exercise of wisdom, leading to complete emancipation from it."<sup>21</sup> Consistent with this he offers as a definition of śūnyatā the words "inward 'freedom'" referring to the negation of the world.<sup>22</sup> Thus the nature of the Madhyamikan salvation is still thought of as release from the world's confinement and limitation but through an insight which reveals that the confinement and limitation is illusory, thereby freeing one from them.

#### Prajñā

Śūnyatā as freedom may also be called "prajñā"--that name of the intuition that everything is śūnya. Prajñā is an intuition first of all because it is not merely a judgement.

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18. Ibid., p. 97

19. Ibid., p. 98

20. Conze, Buddhist Thought in India, p. 61

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., pp. 60-61

Insofar as śūnyatā operates on the discursive level of thought, it acts as a critical dialectic to deny the substantiality of everything and the inherent inadequacy of reason. It is, consistently applied, the negation of judgement and not just a nihilism or negative attitude. The completion of the negative judgement belongs to a different order of knowledge which we can best understand as an intuition.<sup>23</sup>

Specifically, prajñā has been called "contentless intuition" because:

Nothing stands out against it as an other confronting it. It is always described as advayā (non-dual), advaidhīkāra (non-bifurcated). It might be truer to say that the absolute or the entire reality is its content and not any particular limited object.<sup>24</sup>

When this is the case it is easy to see why "prajñā is Absolute, as the Real and the knowledge of it are non-dual (advayā), and non-different."<sup>25</sup> It becomes therefore, synonymous with śūnyatā. Clearly thought is not able to operate in this realm and the principle that "the real is transcendent to thought"<sup>26</sup> begs for a doctrine of gnosis.

Prajñā, however, in its identity with śūnyatā, goes far beyond a secret and mystical truth, and is better understood as "a state of gnosis"<sup>27</sup> if that term is to be used at all. Also, as a state, the soteriological character is provided for, incorporating the whole of the person. By the same token it

23. Murti, op. cit., pp. 155-159

24. Ibid., p. 219

25. Ibid., p. 330

26. Ibid., p. 44

27. Conze, Buddhist Thought in India, p. 56

goes beyond verbal description and expression, neither asserting a teaching nor answering questions.<sup>28</sup> Discursive thought is quite useless to it.<sup>29</sup>

This gives quite a different character to meditation and mind-development in Mahayana, as it does to the treatment of doctrine. As we have seen, even the basic truths of the three marks of existence, of nirvāṇa and saṃsāra, etc. are ultimately submitted to śūnyatā and discovered to be śūnya. This leads to their being "unflinchingly condemned as spurious and contradictory constructions" and the locus of truth centered in "mysticism and revelation"<sup>30</sup>--that is, in prajñā.

Yet Mahayana is clearly not unique in this latter situation insofar as the Theravada recognised itself the essential attainment of certain levels of mind development to understand the true nature of reality and to remove the hindrances which prevented escape from the rebirth cycles. As has been said, "Buddhism is perhaps the one widespread religion which, in theory at least, is wholly mystical, for it recommends to all its followers the practice of mind control and the attainment of intuitive wisdom."<sup>31</sup> However, it should also be stated that "many of the doctrines of Buddhism are claimed to be inductive inferences based on the data of extra-sensory perception" or the various powers the Buddhist believes are attainable, e.g. psychokinesis (levitation, etc.), clairaudience, telepathic knowledge, retroactive knowledge, clairvoyance.<sup>32</sup>

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28. Streng, op. cit., p. 89

29. Stcherbatsky, Buddhist Logic, Vol. I, p. 10

30. Ibid.

31. Bloefeld, op. cit., p. 15

32. Jayatilleke, Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge, pp. 438 and 459; cf. Spiro, Buddhism and Society, pp. 50-51

The difference between super-mental development and the attainment of *prajñā* can only be clearly understood if it is related back to the difference between a metaphysical dharma theory and an essentially epistemological state of *prajñā*. Thus:

The Madhyamika denies metaphysics not because there is no real for him; but because it is inaccessible to reason. He is convinced of a higher faculty, intuition (*prajñā*) with which the Real (*tattva*) is identical.<sup>33</sup>

The intuition of *śūnyatā* is the attainment of *śūnyatā* in Mahayana thought. Yet, in the Theravada teaching the higher mental powers and scope is necessary but the attainment of them "is treated at the same level as normal perception and it is considered possible to make both valid and erroneous inferences on this data."<sup>34</sup> One might say therefore, that epistemology is the heart of Mahayana whereas metaphysics is the heart of the Theravada. While the latter must bring the streams of real dharmas to cessation, the former must "know" within himself the emptiness of everything in the phenomenal world--its ultimate unreality--even including itself.

#### Buddhas and Bodhisattvas

#### The Bodhisattva Doctrine

While Nagarjuna and the Madhyamikas represent the greatest development of the doctrine of *śūnyatā*, and *prajñā*, relative to the *śūnyatā* doctrine, Mahayana as a whole is most noted for its development of *prajñā* in relationship to who and what persons ultimately "are." In this development there are two foci--that

33. Murti, op. cit., p. 126

34. Jayatilleke, op. cit., p. 459



of Buddhahood and that of Bodhisattvahood. It found its earliest flowering perhaps in the *prajñā-pāramitā* texts, but one can trace its history with the centuries and the growth of Buddhism to the East: Tibet and Mongolia, China, Korea and Japan--today regions dominated by Mahayana Buddhism.

The term "prajna-paramita" means literally "the perfection of (intuitive) wisdom." As such it represents most immediately the conviction of the Mahayana that it was the duty of the Buddhist not only to attain such insight and enlightenment as was necessary for the attainment of his goal, but to go beyond that and acquire the perfect wisdom of a Buddha.<sup>35</sup> It must be noted however that the perfection sought relates to the Mahayana understanding of *prajñā* as the attainment of *śūnyatā*, and not just to the superogatory powers which the Theravada believe Buddhas possess but not arahants.

It is of critical importance that Mahayana intuition of *śūnyatā* draws the Buddhist into a monistic understanding, for the individualistic attainment of the Buddhist concerned with the cessation of his own rebirth cycles prompts the other major aspect of the Mahayana development concerning us here--namely the necessity for a universalistic interpretation of the individual's task. If all is *śūnyatā*--i.e. one--and if *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are but the preceeding thesis and antithesis of that synthesis, each man is identical with them in their totality and thus there is no possibility of meaningful individual salvation. All sentient beings in which resides the

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35. Dayal, op. cit., p. 4

delusion of saṃsāra must attain to prajñā, and the perfection of prajñā by the same token is the illimitable form of it.

Hence, individual ending of a stream of rebirths falls short of the vision and goal, for each must attain "individual" prajñā-pāramitā which entails "universal" prajñā-pāramitā as well. The emphasis on the latter therefore resulted first of all in the vision of fully enlightened beings deathlessly continuing to assist those still bound in saṃsāra and secondly, but more significantly, resulted in what might be called the sanctification of saṃsāra. The latter follows necessarily from the identification of saṃsāra with nirvāṇa--from the fact that saṃsāra like nirvāṇa is śūnyatā, prajñā, salvation. Thus saṃsāra is as much the realm of one who has attained prajñā as is nirvāṇa.

The Bodhisattva doctrine therefore is essentially a consistent development of Mahayana prajñā and śūnyatā doctrine, and as Dayal shows, in its very nature as such it pushes irrevocably toward an apparent reversal of Theravada ideals.<sup>36</sup> In place of detachment is the desire for the salvation of all beings; in place of the slowing down of all passions is the intensification of salvific activities; in place of the attainment of nirvāṇa within the individual context is the vision of all of saṃsāra as but the misunderstanding of nirvāṇa in which all men already may alternatively be understood to be.

The path of one who would be a Bodhisattva became the object of analysis and enumeration quite as complex as had the

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36. Dayal, op. cit., p. 159

subject of dharmas and states of consciousness in the Abhidharma. Thus for example, one encounters a list of ten stages to Bodhisattvahood, each stage subject to finer delineation and enumeration of points.<sup>37</sup> Likewise one has the endless attention to the powers and skills of the Bodhisattva who, as he progresses, goes far beyond the special mental powers and physical powers of the arahant. In the end, the beings described attain to conditions of existence and to activities which merit the description of god-like by the standards of Western mythology, for to speak of them as mere humans becomes clearly inaccurate. They are not mere men, using the skills and tools available to mere men, but Bodhisattvas using the skills and tools available to Bodhisattvas. It may be true that it was as men that they began their Bodhisattva career, but it is not as men that they end it. One might say they are the product of an evolution as spectacular as man's from the amoeba, but no less natural or possible.

Perhaps one of the most radical ramifications of the Bodhisattva career is that of the aid which he gives by merit-sharing. Merit is "punya" which Dayal explains in this way:

Every act, which is inspired by charity or charity and morality, produces some punya, which leads to welfare in this life and also secures happy re-births. Punya is generally regarded as the power of good deeds that were done in previous existences.<sup>38</sup>

The Bodhisattva uses his punya, however, by the principle of pariṇāmanā--the "bending round towards," transfer or dedication

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37. Dayal, op. cit., pp. 51 ff.; Schumann, op. cit., pp. 130 ff.

38. Dayal, op. cit., p. 189

of it.<sup>39</sup> This is done in two ways: 1) directing it towards one's own enlightenment (if still aspiring to Bodhisattvahood), and 2) applying it to the welfare and spiritual progress of all creatures.<sup>40</sup> So different is this from the Theravada view that Schumann points out its presence "distinguishes Mahayanic from Hinayanic texts."<sup>41</sup>

This principle of charity and merit-sharing is so central to the Mahayana ideal of the Bodhisattva that ethics and karma must be brought in line with it and not visa versa. Thus the Bodhisattva, viewing things on a great scale, motivated by a love which is regulated by *prajñā*, may release sufferers from the hells to which their karma confined them and undertake to suffer in those hells themselves on behalf of the sufferers.<sup>42</sup> The Bodhisattva may even himself have to engage in activities which would appear ethically questionable to plant the root of merit or enlightenment in beings bound in the illusion of *saṃsāra*.<sup>43</sup>

Another substantial way in which other beings can be assisted is by the creation of an environment which will maximise their opportunity for progress and the ease with which progress can be made. In its fullest development this is not just another aspect of the use of merit to provide them with a more favorable rebirth, but the actual creation of lands into which beings can be born--called pure lands. This is accomplished by the supernatural powers to create phenomena--in this

39. Ibid., p. 188

40. Ibid., p. 192

41. Schumann, op. cit., p. 111

42. Dayal, op. cit., p. 192; Schumann, op. cit., pp. 111-112

43. Schumann, op. cit., p. 112



case a paradise specifically designed for the attainment of enlightenment. However, on these high planes of supernormal powers, the distinction between Buddhas and Bodhisattvas fades and wavers.

The confusion between the two results despite the superficial distinction that a Bodhisattva is supposedly one who vows not to enter nirvāṇa himself until all sentient beings have become enlightened; and a Buddha is one who possesses full super-normal powers but will enter nirvāṇa at the end of his current life (which may be aeons long). However a Buddha may vow to aid sentient beings as well<sup>44</sup> and a fully evolved Bodhisattva may transcend the limitations of a physical human body and even, through śūnyatā, the other limitations such as final death.<sup>45</sup> One can say that the Bodhisattva in doing this relies on emptiness.<sup>46</sup> Thus by the principle of sunyata and the freedom of salvation from confinement in delusion which prajna produces, there can be no ultimate Buddha/Bodhisattva distinction in the end.

#### Buddhology

Something of this is seen in the development of the concept of the Buddha by Mahayana--a development so far-reaching that Murti wrote:

Buddha is Bhagavan, God, endowed as he is with power and perfection. He possesses, in entirety, all power, splendour, fame, wealth, knowledge and act.<sup>47</sup>

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44. Schumann, op. cit., pp. 105-106

45. Ibid., pp. 112-113

46. Streng, op. cit., pp. 85-86

47. Murti, op. cit., p. 280

This too, follows from the śūnyatā doctrine and its monistic import. Both the identification of all parts with the whole and the synthesis of opposites, implies the designation of the essence of phenomena as the Buddha seen in terms of his fullest powers. Thus, for example: Buddha = prajñā = śūnyatā = nirvāṇa = saṃsāra = Buddha. This aspect of the Mahayana development is consistent with the rest, for as Murti asserts:

Anything like an adequate treatment of the implications of the prajñā-pāramitā conception would have to consider prajñā (intuition) as Absolute, as Freedom and as Tathāgata.<sup>48</sup>

This term "tathāgata" was used very early to designate the Buddha as "he who thus came,"<sup>49</sup> but in Mahayana it expands to serve this identification of the universal Buddha principle within the cosmos.

To cope with these exploding values and understandings which the term "Buddha" developed, the Mahayana used a three-fold designation. They spoke of the "dharmakāya" or cosmic body when meaning to point to that most illimitable and mystical understanding of the universal nature of Buddha which ultimately only is knowable through prajñā. They spoke of the "sambhogakāya" or blissful body when intending to designate the helpful, non-physical, ethereal and spiritual manifestations which teach and assist the highly advanced on the upper levels of development. Finally, they recognised the "nirmāṇakāya" (or "rūpakāya") --the historically manifested body.<sup>50</sup>

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48. Ibid., p. 227

49. Schumann, op. cit., p. 23

50. Ibid., pp. 101-109

These most directly constitute what we have been intending as the domain of "Buddhology," for each receives full and rich development as a Mahayana teaching (though some texts give a two-fold rather than three-fold division). Thus in this development as regards the nirmanakaya we get the belief that:

The advent of a Buddha in the world is not an accident, the lucky chance of a human being happening to attain enlightenment. It is a deliberate descent of the Divinity, incarnating itself as human being; his various (12 principle) acts from birth to passing away into parinirvāṇa are make-believe acts designed to create a sense of kinship with human beings.<sup>51</sup>

Here, "little significance is attached to the historical Buddha who is a mere phantom body conjured up by the Dharma-body" and as a result this form of Buddhism claims a validity independent of any historical being.<sup>52</sup>

The Buddhas of the sambhogakāya have also been called the Transcendent Buddhas because "they cannot be perceived by the senses," and sometimes they are understood as the creations of the Bodhisattva's or advanced disciple's own mind.<sup>53</sup> In their powers and their will to assist beings working toward the attainment of prajñā and its perfections, they are virtually identical with the transcendent Bodhisattvas who have evolved beyond human rebirths.<sup>54</sup> Together the transcendent Buddhas and Bodhisattvas represent a realm or function perhaps best described as "a mediating principle between the absolute and

51. Murti, op. cit., p. 287. Parinirvāṇa refers to the human death of an arahant or Buddha.

52. Conze, Buddhist Thought in India, p. 232

53. Schumann, op. cit., pp. 104-105; Bloefeld, op. cit., p. 178

54. Schumann, op. cit., pp. 112-117

and phenomenal beings."<sup>55</sup> They offer their assistance as teachers and wonderworkers to the phenomenal worlds but retain their freedom from the restrictions of saṃsāra.

The realm of such Buddhas and Bodhisattvas is called "apratisthitanirvāṇa"--"active nirvāṇa" or "non-fixed nirvāṇa" or "nirvāṇa without standstill."<sup>56</sup> From it they continue to relate to saṃsara while in a state of deliverance which should, by Theravada thought, remove them irrevocably from it. Thus Mahayana comes to conceive an all-encompassing state of liberation from saṃsāra in the sense of absolute freedom replacing bondage. As the absolute freedom which śūnyatā allows is conceived to be nirvāṇa, nirvāṇa may be had with a form of saṃsāric existence (though nonetheless śūnya) and not as the annihilation of it.

#### Summary

Thus Mahayana represents a radically different interpretation of the basic teaching about the Buddha and Buddhahood, saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, from that interpretation of the Theravada. Where the latter recognises "a human Buddha who disappears completely in a lifeless nirvāṇa" the former professes "the ideal of a divine Buddha enthroned in a nirvāṇa full of life." While the one develops a path for personal salvation feasible to all men, the other envisions universal salvation with the help needed from supernatural beings. Finally, while the one represents a radical pluralism, the other conceives a radical monism.<sup>57</sup>

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55. Murti, op. cit., pp. 225 and 280

56. Murti, op. cit., p. 343; Schumann, op. cit., p. 113

57. Murti, op. cit., p. 76; Stcherbatsky, Buddhist Logic, Vol. I, pl. 7



The Mahayana it would seem, would make the Buddha into a cosmic principle, men into Buddhas and saṃsāra into nirvāṇa. All of reality and the forms by which the Buddhist finds his task in it, seems to be undergoing a sacramental revolution. If the bonds of illusion are broken the absolute (śūnyatā) is revealed everywhere in everything and no thing is either what it seems to be or anything but what it is (i.e. śūnya).

The significance of Mahayana teaching to the life of the ordinary believer who finds himself scarcely able even to begin the most preliminary steps to Bodhisattvahood is seen in the religion of devotion to and assistance from the divine reality. Nirvāṇa recedes into oblivion as an ideal and the way of self-salvation by the eightfold path is replaced by reliance upon the Bodhisattvas and the prize of rebirth into a Buddhaland. Assistance from the Divine realm becomes essential to progress which is understood in terms of improving one's environment rather than, at this stage, producing the required changes within oneself.

Mahayana Buddhism thus appears to be a religion populated by multiple saviours providing deliverance to devotees who exercise faith in their powers and call upon them for their assistance. Saṃsāra becomes a wholly magical place in which manifestations from the absolute may appear in any guise or form engaged in the awesome and marvellous work of bringing all beings to the full realisation of their own freedom and Buddhahood. The activities of the freely phenomenalisising character of the absolute are utterly normalised within the everyday world of men and all the other planes of the cosmos.

This means, in the final analysis, that Mahayana Buddhism looks more theistic than Theravada Buddhism does, although both admittedly provide ample room for devotionism and personification of the sacred realities recognised by both. In Mahayana thought however the transcendent is not other than the immanent in any real way. Such distinctions exist only within the bondage of illusion.

In Mahayana thought the significance of the two truths theory for properly presenting its teachings is not to be underestimated. Mahayana truth must thus always be viewed on two levels. On the first, one accepts the illusory confinement and the analysis of man and his world along the lines of dukkha, anicca and anatta or nairātmya emerges--to which the saviours and their salvation by merit sharing and pure lands is offered in response. On this level the supreme Buddha principle manifests itself in the world as an omnipotent, personal and loving transcendent reality. Failing divine assistance man could only see himself as dependent upon and utterly different from that reality.

On the second level, however, all of this is re-viewed and it is understood that dukkha, anicca and saṃsāra are not real but rather are nairātmya. The real is One and everything which would seem to belie this--the manifestations from the Dharmakāya, efforts to become enlightened by men, all the devices of the Bodhisattvas to assist sentient beings, the phenomenal world in its totality--is illusion. This is the final and ultimate truth but the understanding of it is prajñā and that means for men only the first level of truth is available pending the enlightenment which prajñā brings.

The second kind of truth certifies the atheistic nature of Buddhism despite the appearance of the phenomenal, the first level truths of Buddhist teaching. For Buddhism, quasi-theism is a device which serves only provisionally within contexts which are themselves provisional. Nor is it ultimately pantheistic, for *sūnyatā*, the absolute, does not lend itself to religious description--it being only the provisional Dharmakāya which does that. In that sense what lies at the end of the Mahayana epistemological path is as atheistic as the Theravada metaphysical nirvana.

## CHAPTER 10: Theravada and Mahayana: A Summary

Buddhism, like all religion, attempts to provide men with a perfectly integrated understanding and experience of themselves and their world. The two forms we have considered differ profoundly in this process. Consider for example the manner in which the truth is grasped. In Theravada the individual progressed by analysis and by insight gained in the states of consciousness produced by meditation. Ling portrays the process in this way:

The assent which has to be given, largely on trust, to certain moral and metaphysical propositions is intended to serve only as the necessary preliminary to one's proving their truth for oneself at a later stage. These propositions, it is claimed, are grounded in the fact that the universe is the expression of certain laws. <sup>1</sup>

The pattern of moving from faith to knowledge resulting from the abilities of one's own mind which characterises Theravada thought, is paralleled in Mahayana by the move from truth rationally expressed, as in doctrine and dogma, to truth intuited which constitutes that new form of existence designated by the term "prajñā." On this higher level:

There is the denial of all categories and doctrines . . . , of all species of dogmatic philosophy; all dogmatic systems are *drṣṭi* [opinions], and *prajñā* is the negation of all views --*śūnyatā*. <sup>2</sup>

The difference between these two systems is seen in the relatively clear scientific nature of the first which is

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1. Ling, Buddha, Marx and God, p. 18

2. Murti, op. cit., p. 58



essentially a matter of expertise in the use of the mind and understanding of what it reveals, and in the series of qualifications which must accompany our statements about Mahayana teaching. Thus the faith which exists on the lower levels of development is directed toward those manifestations of the universal Buddha nature who will help to produce the desired effect upon one's spiritual progress. Yet what they work on is innate to the devotee and one must ultimately affirm that it is his own nature which recognises its oneness with the apparently external saviours.

One might say that the Theravada methodology is analytical and the Mahayana devotional but both serve to move the Buddhist from an inadequate understanding to a perfect one, and both are true only as a generality in need of constant qualification. It is probably more important to note that, as Lama Govinda has pointed out, "in Buddhism the center of gravity lies within the individual."<sup>3</sup> Likewise Ninian Smart has said of Buddhism:

But unlike the Semetic faiths (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), it starts from an interior mystical quest, rather than from the prophetic experience of a dynamic personal God.<sup>4</sup>

Lama Govinda made the contrast with "religions of revelation" which "depend upon the authority of tradition."<sup>5</sup> In any case Buddhism functions anthropocentrically in the movement toward deeper truth, or the deeper experience of the truth, although this characteristic has by no means shown itself hostile to

3. Govinda, op. cit., p. 39

4. Smart, Doctrine and Argument in Indian Philosophy, p. 39

5. Govinda, op. cit., p. 39

either a highly rationalistic development or a profoundly devotional one--or, for that matter, to combinations of these and other patterns for relating men to religious truth.

This brings us to another point. Despite its saviour-like Bodhisattvas, gods and goddesses, Buddhas and other supernatural beings, the Mahayana no less than the Theravada rejects "God" for reasons which Bloefeld stated thus:

(1) Being non-dualists, they cannot conceive of a supreme being or of other beings as more than provisionally separate; (2) their conception of ultimate reality is impersonal; (3) they look upon the universe not as a creation of divine reality but as a delusion in men's minds [i.e. phenomena do not have the reality they appear to have] . . . .<sup>6</sup>

The Buddhist rejection of a God/world dualism is not so much atheistic in the sense of being anti-theistic as it is in the sense of being non-theistic. Buddhism is thus not theistic but neither did it develop a conscious polemic against theism so that it is only in recent times that theism and Buddhism have had occasion to measure what they themselves are saying in light of each other.

Part of the difficulty in discussing the atheistic nature of Buddhism arises precisely from the very different systems it opposed and its unawareness of orthodox Christianity. Finally its atheism must be founded upon its understanding of reality which for the Theravada is pluralistic (composed of dharmas) and for the Mahayana is monistic (śūnyatā). In this analysis Mahayana is not theistic because of its higher truth of

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6. Bloefeld, op. cit., pp. 51-52

śūnyatā which must eventually reveal the provisional nature of the dharmakāya and absorb it into its own oneness, that absolute emptiness. Theravada is not theistic because dharmas are real ultimately, having their own independent reality and this includes the dharma of nirvāṇa which is impersonal, inactive and soulless.

Yet we must agree with Conze when he declared that Buddhism "is essentially a doctrine of salvation and all its philosophical statements are subordinate to its soteriological purpose."<sup>7</sup> The salvation which the Buddhists conceive is an ending to a bondage. The bondage to the Mahayana is not ultimately real and the realisation of the truth of freedom thus constitutes salvation. To the Theravada however it is all too real and will only be ended through the use of the natural laws by which the dharmas function or exist.

It is in this context that it is most inappropriate to speak of Buddhism as either strictly world-affirming or world-negating, any more than as pessimistic. Buddhism provides both a day by day, this-worldly pattern of life (ethics, values, specifically Buddhist activities, a body of knowledge to be increasingly understood) designed to help the Buddhist become competent in living, achieving his greatest potential, psychologically able to respond positively to any eventuality. Buddhism also provides ideals, skills and attainments which appear to surpass normal or even extraordinary human achievements.

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7. Conze, Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies, p. 213

In this latter category are the stages of Bodhisattvahood or arahantship in which the individual assumes powers the facticity of which is at least unestablished by Western empirical standards if not generally denied. When one enters this area it must be granted that Buddhism would appear to have abandoned the man in the street as he is and to offer a quite other-worldly vision. In fact, in both the Theravada and Mahayana systems an evolutionary pattern exists and men are required to master their present situation if they are to move to a further, more advanced one. The more mythological teachings should inspire this task but they cannot replace it.

Ultimately Buddhism as something which is practiced as well as learned, understood and conceptually integrated, seeks to decrease suffering in this life through a realistic evaluation of the deepest cause of suffering and an ethic and life style designed accordingly. It is anthropocentric not only in its analysis of where truth is to be found, and how, but also in the changes which it seeks. These changes men must produce within themselves even if it does not appear so to them in some stages, for they cannot be the passive recipients of them.

The treatment of nirvāṇa reveals that this highest ideal is no simple negation of this world either. In Theravada thought the distinction is made between *sopādhiseṣa-nirvāṇa* which is achieved by the arahant in his lifetime and *nirupādhiseṣa-nirvāṇa* which represents the continuation of the state after the arahant has himself died.<sup>8</sup> The distinction

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8. Brandon (editor), A Dictionary of Comparative Religion, item by T. O. Ling, p. 469; Murti, *op. cit.*, pp. 347 and 349



assures the propriety of assigning to the condition of a living individual in this life and in this world the name of the supreme achievement. Such a person is characterised by a peace and insight<sup>9</sup> which must radiate through his living experience in this world.

Sopādhiseṣa-nirvāṇa does not represent a heavenly existence. The man continues to eat, sleep, talk, walk, relate, be ill or well and otherwise be a normal human being. It does not even eradicate the final event of death. It affirms life as what it is: Wholly impermanent thus filled with suffering and soulless. It is life as such which it masters, utilises, and absolutely accepts. The one aspect of this world and existence in it which it does not accept and sets itself against is the pointless perpetuation of suffering, impermanence and soullessness. Theravada Buddhism tells a man how to live and die in this life so as to minimise suffering and maximise the positive side of reality.

In Mahayana thought the nature of world utilisation and affirmation is revealed in its identification of saṃsāra with nirvāṇa and in its concept of apratiṣṭhitanirvāṇa.<sup>10</sup> The Theravada may be triumphalist in their vision of the potential for a man but the Mahayana are triumphalist in their vision of what a man is. The former is intent on a process of self-mastery, the latter on a process of growing enlightenment. In either case something can happen to man in this life which changes his experience of this world and himself from negative

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9. Smart, Doctrine and Argument in Indian Philosophy, p. 34

10. Murti, op. cit., pp. 343-344

to positive. In so doing only truth or reality already available in the very structure of reality (the patterns of dharmic flow or the *sūnyatā* nature) is utilised.

Finally then, we may summarise by making these points about Buddhism. First, it is not dualistic but maintains that in the world is to be found all that matters, variously understood monistically or pluralistically. Secondly, it is in this sense world-affirming although its descriptive words which serve that uniquely Buddhist kind of world-affirmation appear emotively negative: Suffering, emptiness, impermanence, insubstantiality. Finally, the vision of a sacramental life, hallowed by the Buddhist identification of it as such in opposition to other modes of life, provides the Buddhist with a holy ideal in some fundamental sense inseparable from the profane world.

In Buddhism the sacred may occur in any place or in any time. Indeed, for the Mahayana it is in all places and all times and the "trick" is to "see" that the profane is really the sacred. In Theravada the profane may become the sacred--man may realise it from the very stuff of reality and his life may embody it prior to his death in such a way that the event of his death is affirmed as wholly natural and sacred and thus utterly right when it occurs.

## PART II: ANALYSIS

## A. The Christian Atheists and Buddhism

## CHAPTER 11: Simone Weil

## The Divine Movement

In Mahayana thought, as we have seen, there is the deceptively substantial world of samsara with its wonderful assortment of forms and powers which reveal themselves to be ultimately empty before the onslaught of an insight which denudes them of all their illusive characteristics. Analysis thus progressively deprives of any true beingness that which seems to be; and the full and absolute force of this the Mahayana intends with the word "śūnyatā."

Now Simone Weil presents us with a process not unlike this Mahayana one, although it must be arrived at in stages. Thus if one looks at creation in Weil's vision one finds her speaking of something which can only be nothing. First of all it represents God's diminution,<sup>1</sup> his loss of whatever the "substance" of divinity is; but also it is the replacement of true divinity by false divinity--that which is inauthentic and empty of divinity.<sup>2</sup> Thus true "being" can only be God, for creation is the negative side of all that he is.

If however, creation cannot "be" it is equally clear in Weil, that neither is God "being," for the creation is but an aspect of what he is--the aspect of that part of God which God loves and which makes self-love by God possible.<sup>3</sup> For all of

1. Weil, Waiting on God, p. 87

2. Weil, First and Last Notebooks, p. 140

3. Weil, Waiting on God, p. 68

its negative attributes in relation to the "God" aspect of divinity (his absence, withdrawal, its false divinity), creation is the divine creation/decreation, the process by which God goes to the furthestmost point from himself so that he may contemplate himself, love himself and eat himself.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, in Weil the entire process, that circular movement which changes nothing, is but "the perfect image of the eternal and blessed act which is the life of the Trinity,"<sup>5</sup> and it is precisely this which carries all the negation into God himself. Indeed Weil's "God" in this context is but a point in a totality of which she can speak most clearly only in ontological negatives and which itself must be understood as "God" consistent with the Christian "Godhead."

Thus it is not just creation which is absence of God, emptiness, loss of substance, but it is the Godhead as the process creation/decreation and its extremes of God and Christ. If God does not exist in creation, the lack of existence penetrates infinitely the meaning of divinity, for creation is nothing but an aspect of God. Consistent with this Weil constantly negates her designations of the Absolute: The Good is a nothingness which is not unreal;<sup>6</sup> the void is the supreme fullness;<sup>7</sup> "this world insofar as it is completely empty of God is God himself"<sup>8</sup>--for, it follows, God himself is emptiness.

The greatest difficulty in following Weil's "cosmology" from the viewpoint of an analogous Mahayana one, is language.

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4. Weil, Waiting on God, p. 28; Intimations of Christianity, p. 149

5. Weil, Intimations of Christianity, p. 93

6. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 13

7. Ibid., p. 21

8. Ibid., p. 99



Weil does use the word "empty" in the context of the whole universe and she does use the word "void"<sup>9</sup> and these are doubtless close equivalents to the Buddhist "śūnyatā" and "śūnya." She does not, however, use them with the same single-mindedness elevated to an epistemological absolute as Nagarjuna reveals. Weil talks about the cosmos she envisions, never adhering too consistently to any one formulation or expression or description, but always pushing to create something of the nature of that vision in the scattered words that somehow, albeit obscurely, serve it.

The impetus of her writing is clear however. Creation is empty of God for he is not there, yet God too is empty for he is present in the form of absence, he is creation emptied of divinity, and he is as truly decreation as he is creation. As Nagarjuna would say: Śūnyatā is śūnya. Thus if "God" is the word which functions as a kind of absolute for Weil, it can be imbued with little more content than "śūnyatā." Weil wants as consistent a rejection of ultimacies and finalities as did Nagarjuna. God cannot be made to be, to have being; and creation was made to be "not being." The only appropriate modes of description are those which remove all ontological grounding.

Thus in Weil one gets the vision of creation, like samsara, reflecting order and purpose of the kind which might be described as "ongoingness" which is cyclical, or a changeless "perpetual becoming."<sup>10</sup> While the Buddhists would speak of the

9. Ibid., p. 21

10. Weil, Intimations of Christianity, p. 185

paṭiccasamuppāda and karma as reflecting capacity for structure and order in saṃsāra, Weil would speak of gravity and necessity.<sup>11</sup> So long as one remained able only to see and know creation or saṃsāra, one would be subject to this order-giving law, and remain confined to it.

Both Weil and the Buddhists however, envisioned the ability to know the voidness of that saṃsāra or creation. To Weil it was the absence of God, the Trinity as an act of self-emptying and self-eating, as creation/decreation, as a deifugal force and self-loving which constituted an attraction/repulsion whole or unity. For both, the attainment of this vision or this understanding, was at once the achievement of emptiness and the knowledge of it. Thus for the Buddhist prajñā = śūnyatā because knowing śūnyatā is being śūnya. Likewise for Weil, the acceptance of the void is the counterbalance of the void's creation--the one both provides the necessity and the energy for the other and they share a supernatural nature.<sup>12</sup> In both visions voidness and realisation of voidness are but aspects of one function.

Also, the non-existent God parallels the śūnya nirvāṇa of the Mahayana Buddhist and its identification with saṃsāra. The emptiness and voidness, the absence and non-finality of the universe is the divine self-eating and self-contemplation. On the other side of the void of creation is the void of decreation. The God who loves himself through his non-existence in creation loves the creation because it is himself. Nothing is other

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11. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 1; Intimations of Christianity, p. 185

12. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 10

than him, and he is not other than the nothing. Creation must know itself ultimately as "God's absence" just as God is present to himself in the absence of creation. That emptiness, with its extremities at the creation and crucifixion is a mediation constituted by the divine spirit. It is the ultimate divine emptiness. It is the void which is realised with the recognition that the universe is devoid of finality except as a void whole.<sup>13</sup>

All of this is to say, of course, that creator and creation in Weil are empty and precisely that is their fullness. To separate the one from the other in any final way is impossible, but to see the one through the other is the only valid understanding. Still Weil lacks the advantages she would have gained by having given to this vision a key designation such as "śūnyatā" is.

Nevertheless it is true that God is empty where creation is concerned and creation is empty where God is concerned and that thereby the whole of God feeds on creation and creation feeds on God (his diminution). Likewise Weil allows at no point a coming to rest of the cyclical movement encompassing both creator and creation and depriving both of substance, finality and being. There is no ground, no place, no final designation which distinguishes that which is eaten from that which eats, of that which loves from that which is loved, of that which empties from that which is emptied.

Voidness does not function as the universal critique in Weil's thought, however, insofar as she does not elevate it and

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13. Weil, Intimations of Christianity, p. 199

focus on it as did Nagarjuna. Rather, Weil stands once removed from the purity of this concept at a point of greater complexity, namely at the point where the underlying intuition is of the unity of opposites. Weil therefore is more intent on saying: These are the same; than she is in saying: These are one emptiness. The difference is a matter of tone, emphasis, and perhaps clarity, so that one wonders if she would not have ultimately come to develop her vision in the language of emptiness even as she found herself always reflecting its underlying truth.

The fact remains however that Weil is not univocal. As the circle she contemplates spins, she is mesmerised by the apparent interchanging of the two sides--now it is creator, now creation, now absence, now presence. But they are two sides of one whole, an endless movement without beginning or end to its aspects, ever cycling, momentarily appearing in one aspect but just as truly the aspect in which it will, in the next moment of contemplation, appear.

Weil can seemingly only do this justice by describing each aspect and noting that each of them shares the same emptiness of finality and that being does not seem to her to constitute a truth capable of eradicating the potentially secret and idolatrous unity of the changing phenomena in the cyclical movement. Thus all is empty but there is no absolute emptiness, only the eternal creation/decreation. Her synthesis is not a third higher truth, but the intuition of the symbiosis--the living unity--of the poles inherent in it.

Mahayana did this too when it developed the concept of "active nirvāṇa" from which the transcendent Bodhisattvas who



have realised the six perfections (and therefore nirvāṇa) and thus merit the designation "Great Beings" (Mahāsattva), may continue to be effective in saṃsara.<sup>14</sup> This curious concept seems to span all aspects of the illusive phenomena of saṃsāra as well as the qualities of the non-phenomenalising nirvāṇa. Clearly the underlying principle of śūnyatā as developed by Nagarjuna and the Madhyamikas makes such a union possible, since it only actualises the freedom inherent in the transcendent state of full perfection--i.e. perfect realisation of śūnyatā. Yet it reflects a complexity still one step removed from the simplicity of absolute nirvana.

In Weil, united as the whole, is the self-emptying creation moving toward the crucifixion which becomes the negative reverse of the creator and which turns the movement toward decreation through the mediation of the spirit. This is to create a negative metaphysics or a metaphysics of emptiness as we have seen. It is too, to deny the ultimate reality or materiality of the phenomenal world, on the one hand, and to remove the identity of God as "being" outside creation on the other. But the unity herein indicated is a unity of pure relativity and change, never seen as static or frozen in an eventual undifferentiated oneness, even though changing nothing.

This clearly makes sense in Weil's context, for even though the eternal cycling is cosmically conceived it is not progressive--it is not going anywhere. Weil does seem to envision something both active yet contained however, and thus

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14. Murti, op. cit., p. 343; Schumann, op. cit., pp. 112-113

defined, set, a "life" which is ultimately one in its three-foldness: Emptying as a creative act, perfect emptiness, the absorption of emptiness. Here active nirvāṇa as saṃsāra, pāramitā and śūnyatā does seem analogous to Weil.

### Suffering

As well as comparing the emptiness theme in Weil with that of śūnyatā in Mahayana, it is interesting to compare Weil's basic understanding of the world with the three marks of existence as the Theravada Buddhist formulates them. One is immediately struck, in doing so, by the prime significance of suffering in Weil's thought. Indeed, one of her images for man's situation is reminiscent of the Buddhist image of the enormous, even ocean-like flood which constitutes saṃsāra and the raft of the Buddha's teaching which takes one across. Weil's image is less optimistic, however:

Man is like a castaway, clinging to a spar and tossed by the waves. He has no control over the movement imposed on him by the water. From the highest heaven God throws a rope. The man either grasps it or not. If he does, he is still subject to the pressures imposed by the sea, but these pressures are combined with the new mechanical factor of the rope, so that the mechanical relations between the man and the sea have changed. His hands bleed from the pressure of the rope, and he is sometimes so buffeted by the sea that he lets go, and then catches it again.<sup>15</sup>

The nature of the suffering most central to her is the quality of its endlessness and its only mechanical change. Indeed, to grasp the line between the creator and one point in his

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15. Weil, First and Last Notebooks, p. 82

creation which a man represents<sup>16</sup> is to introduce a new source of suffering into one's existence.

This image that the contact with the dynamic source of the whole is productive of suffering is analogous to the implicit realisation of the Buddhist that only honest and effective analysis reveals the full and inevitable extent of suffering within saṃsāra. Thus in a sense the Buddhist does become more aware of suffering by virtue of his refusal to delude himself. Weil too insists that "men can only appear to elevate themselves above human misery by disguising the rigours of destiny in their own eyes, by the help of illusion, of intoxication, or of fanaticism."<sup>17</sup> The man who grabs the rope is, in effect, acknowledging the whole meaning of his illusory independent existence and its painful nature, for the rope represents no more than the insight into the true nature of things and the passive acceptance of it.

Suffering and wisdom are thus intimately bound together in Weil's thought, even as they are in Buddhism. To be wise is to understand in the most profound--i.e. experiential--manner the fundamental nature of suffering in existence. She sees the understanding of St. John of the Cross that participation in the suffering of the cross "alone allows penetration into the depths of divine wisdom" as being in line with the law: "By suffering comes understanding."<sup>18</sup>

In Weil's vision, suffering is elevated to divine significance however, indicating a profound affirmation of it

16. Weil, Intimations of Christianity, p. 197

17. Ibid., p. 54

18. Ibid., pp. 58-59

which stands in startling contrast to the Buddhist quest for detachment from it and termination of it. This could have been predicted by her cosmic crucifixion<sup>19</sup> and its centrality to God's self-love and self-eating. In her divine universe of creation/decreation, suffering is in the very nature of God's willing the cyclical movement because it is the opposite pole to the creator and without this dipolarity the whole of what God "is" could not be. Thus Weil says that the "abyss of love on both sides" which "the abandonment at the supreme moment of the crucifixion" is, constitutes "the real proof that Christianity is something divine."<sup>20</sup> By the same token, she admits that it is the fact that God willed suffering which makes her consent to it even in that abhorrent form of a Child's tear.<sup>21</sup>

Thus for Weil, the understanding that suffering is an identifying mark of creation calls forth an affirmation of it. For her even "the supreme greatness of Christianity lies in the fact that it does not seek a supernatural remedy for suffering but a supernatural use for it."<sup>22</sup> Suffering is one aspect of the divine activity and to reject it is at one and the same time to reject the divine activity and the truth of one's own existence.

Yet one cannot assume that this realisation came effortlessly to Weil. Indeed, like the rope in her vision, it is itself productive of suffering, so that she says:

I feel an ever increasing sense of  
devastation, both in my intellect  
and in the center of my heart, at

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19. Ibid., p. 93

20. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 79

21. Ibid., p. 68

22. Ibid., p. 73



my inability to think with truth at the same time about the affliction of men, the perfection of God, and the link between the two.<sup>23</sup>

Clearly perfection must incorporate suffering for perfect God is the triune God: Creator, crucified, and mediator--in which all of creation participates through the crucifixion and mediation. Yet Weil's complaint is a sign of the destructive and painful nature of this insight.

At this point it is perhaps instructive to note that with the development of Mahayana thought, the idea was introduced that "dukkha (suffering) should be welcomed with joy if it is endured in the service of other creatures."<sup>24</sup> However even should the Bodhisattva enter a hell-world on behalf of a sentient being, the perfection of his insight which allows him to welcome pain with joy, also ultimately places him "beyond and above both pain and pleasure."<sup>25</sup> Thus detachment represents a final triumph over dukkha whether dukkha is seen as a real or illusory aspect of saṃsāra; and even insofar as Mahayana might be said to make use of suffering in aiding other creatures, it is always with the growth of this conquering detachment in mind and for the purpose of its final fruit.

Weil's understanding of joy is also significant here, for joy is to suffering what the creator is to the crucified or God is to Son. Weil says therefore, that "perfect and infinite joy really exists within God" and as it is such "whether I share in it or no,"<sup>26</sup> its independence from suffering is as ultimate as

23. Weil, Seventy Letters, p. 178

24. Dayal, op. cit., p. 159

25. Ibid., p. 160

26. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 33

as suffering's independence from it--suffering represented by the perfect and infinite suffering of the moment of Christ's abandonment on the cross previously referred to. Yet the ability to conceive full joy is part of the purification and intensity of suffering, just as "it is necessary to have had a revelation of reality through joy in order to find reality through suffering."<sup>27</sup> Hereby she relates the two poles, indicating the mixing of the two, suffering and joy, along the line of creation which lies between them. Each pole may be perfect and infinite, but the totality in between is related to both and thus limited and mixed.

Finally, this matter of suffering is related to that of evil. Seemingly Weil would allow the presence of evil in God by recognition of it in the world--one form of his emptiness. Thus she tells us that "the absence of God is the mode of divine presence which corresponds to evil" and as Christ marks the point of absolute absence, his suffering is redemptive and "God is present in extreme evil."<sup>28</sup> This qualifies the meaning of divine goodness obviously, and in recognition of this Weil insists that "the word good has not the same meaning when it is a term of the correlation good-evil as when it describes the very being of God."<sup>29</sup>

With Weil's divine whole mixing joy and suffering and presence and absence, therefore, one must recognise it also as mixing good and evil within it in a combination which on the higher plane may still be spoken of as having good. She

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27. Ibid., p. 76

28. Ibid., p. 24

29. Ibid., p. 89

asserts therefore that creation is "good broken up into pieces and scattered throughout evil"<sup>30</sup> and argues that if everything were worthless evil could take nothing from us--proving the good aspects of life.<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, she also introduces the polarity "innocence-evil" as an analogous one, it would seem, to "presence-absence," for she speaks of evil as "the innocence of God" since it requires us to place him "at an infinite distance in order to conceive of him as innocent of evil."<sup>32</sup> Innocence is remote from evil and thereby guilt is excluded from the unity of God. Christ's crucifixion is suffering, absence and evil; God is joy, presence and innocence; and creation, the mediation of the two, mixes these without guilt within it or the judgement of evil upon the whole.

#### Impermanence and Soullessness

The second mark of existence also present in Weil as well as Buddhism is that of impermanence. We have already noted the inherent dynamism of the cyclical movement which constitutes the divine life and therefore also creation. The vision of its eternal continuation justifies Weil's speaking of the universe as a "perpetual becoming," and yet the changelessness of the whole she can recognise also as order which she identifies as "equilibrium and immobility."<sup>33</sup> Her universe is a static internal dynamism. Seen from within, everything is "finite, limited, wears out."<sup>34</sup> She herself draws a parallel with Buddhism here:

30. Ibid., p. 62

31. Ibid., p. 76

32. Ibid., p. 99

33. Weil, Intimations of Christianity, p. 185

34. Weil, Waiting on God, p. 139

We want everything which has a value to be eternal. Now everything which has a value is the product of a meeting, lasts throughout that meeting and ceases when those things which met are separated. That is the central idea of Buddhism (the thought of Heraclitus). It leads straight to God.<sup>35</sup>

In pointing out the discrepancy between our desires and the fact, Weil is even following the Buddhists in the relationship which they see between human suffering and impermanence.

Although the Buddhists would not say that impermanence led to God, they would certainly agree that a full understanding of impermanence could lead to release understood either in terms of ending it or transcending it. Weil, with this statement, can only be reminding us that God is the eternal cycling of creation/decreation by which he is his own nourishment and his own consummation of the emptiness which he made from himself. If we are to seek an analogy to this in Buddhist thought, it would have to be as we attempted to show, in the identity of saṃsāra/nirvāṇa achieved by the Mahayana in their intuition of śūnyatā.

The third mark of existence, it will be recalled, is anatta--soullessness. Now Weil not infrequently makes use of the word "soul" even as she does the word "God" and as with the latter, only a close and full analysis of what she means by it can indicate how orthodox or heterodox that use is within the Christian context. Interestingly, such an analysis is almost at once productive of another broad similarity between Weil's vision and that of Buddhism.

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35. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 97



Weil, as we saw, describes each human as "a point through which God's divine love for self passes"<sup>36</sup> and its "self" as "only the shadow which sin and error cast by stopping the light of God," and she adds, "I take this shadow for being."<sup>37</sup> By this description she declares the illusory nature of that which man identifies himself as and defines him wholly in terms of the cyclical movement of the divine life. He thus becomes identified with the ever-changing and moving aspect of God and thereby is deprived of any true being. Insofar as he "is," he is illusory and inauthentic.

The negative and undesirable nature of our being is reasserted also by Weil's view of time as "God's waiting as a beggar for our love"--that love which of course is not ultimately ours both because we are not and there is no "us" to have love and also because the creation is nothing but the flow of divine love.<sup>38</sup> Clearly however, in our illusory existence we hinder that flow and reduce God to poverty by depriving him of his own sustenance.

Knowing this raises the issue of our consent to our non-being which, if it is given, means that "all our being, all that in us appears to be ourselves, becomes infinitely more foreign, more indifferent, and more distant than this uninterrupted passage of God's love."<sup>39</sup> Weil can easily be seen to be saying here, that as we abandon ourselves and let the "entity" we seem to be cease creating illusions so that it is only the

36. Weil, Intimations of Christianity, p. 197

37. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 35

38. Weil, First and Last Notebooks, p. 141; Waiting on God, p. 76

39. Weil, Intimations of Christianity, pp. 197-198

flow of the stuff of creation/decreation, the truth of our not being an independent entity will be actualised in us and will replace the illusion.

There is no mitigating the totality of the soullessness Weil affirms, for she tells us:

To remit debts is to renounce our own personality. It means that we renounce everything which goes to make up our ego, without any exception. It means knowing that in the ego there is nothing whatever, no psychological element, which external circumstances could not do away with. It means accepting that truth. It means being happy that things should be so.<sup>40</sup>

Nor is the happiness a "consolation prize," for even the joy of being the unobstructed return of God to himself, that joy which flows with the love, is God's joy, perfect joy, and with God the unobstructed object of that movement "no corner is left for saying 'I.'"<sup>41</sup>

Weil's self-abandonment and soullessness is not a misunderstood case of the absorption of the soul in the divine fullness, either. To specify this she asserts that the renunciation of the illusory power of saying "I am" is not a transference of that power to God, "for the true I am' of God is infinitely different from our illusory one."<sup>42</sup> This truth is related to that of our false divinity. Creation has nothing it can return to God, it is only the prelude to decreation and God's return to himself in the movement of the divine life.

40. Weil, Waiting on God, p. 152

41. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 27

42. Weil, First and Last Notebooks, p. 87

Like the Buddhists, Weil sees the implication in this perspective that possession is utterly meaningless. Thus "social goods are no more than reinforcements to the power of saying 'I,'" <sup>43</sup> she points out, and ultimately "we possess nothing in the world" as everything can be lost. <sup>44</sup> There remains to us in this view but one free and independent act: The destruction of the "I" which we do as a gift to God. <sup>45</sup> As beings contingent upon "sin and error" as Weil said, our contingency's eradication is the eradication of our own being. To destroy the illusion of being an authentic, existent entity is the only true act of an inauthentic illusion.

The illusory individual is not just undesirable because it blocks the divine movement, but also because it seems to be the producer of even more illusions than that of its self or "I." This characteristic Weil calls the imagination which, as the "filler up of the void, is essentially a liar." <sup>46</sup> In this continual filling up activity of the imagination, it blocks "the fissures through which grace might pass" <sup>47</sup> and as grace would function for the destruction of the self, imagination can be seen as what might be called the instinct for survival of the self. Itself ultimately unreal, it creates more and more unreality in the effort to prevent the individual from perceiving that internal unreality. Like the liar who must lie to hide the fact of the initial lie, the web of his own making must ultimately appear for what it is and the truth emerge.

43. Ibid.

44. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 23

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid., p. 16

47. Ibid.

Ultimately in Weil's vocabulary, "self" and "I" and "ego" and "personality" are used to indicate all of what an entity imagines itself to be and all of that is illusory and undesirable. "Soul" is used to designate nothing other than this, but usually represents the self denuded of imagination and coming to understand its own poverty of being and is thus engaged in the destruction of the blocks, of the "I," etc. and the emptying of error and sin which prevent the divine flow from moving without obstruction. In its proper state the soul is no more than the name of a point in that flow of love. As a point in creation it is clearly empty of being yet insofar as it represents the free movement of the divine life it is a possible concept. Thus while "self" should be destroyed, as it is contingent upon sin and error, "soul" cannot be destroyed as it is contingent upon the divine life. It is not that soul is anything real, but precisely that it is itself the emptiness of God which makes it both indestructible and unidentifiable as an entity, yet established as a point in creation by the act of creation.

In this discussion of Weil's soullessness we see the demand to destroy all sense of possession even the sense of possessing beingness of one's own. In this sense detachment emerges from Weil's thought as it does from Buddhist, as a desirable achievement--both detachment from the world and from the self. The significance of this truth in Weil's vision cannot be overestimated. Thus even as the Buddha in the second truth pointed at craving as the key to man's entanglement in *samsāra*, Weil states: "The reality of the world is the result of our



attachment."<sup>48</sup> Likewise, even as the Buddhist identified the reality for which one craved as only apparent and not true reality, Weil also identifies the reality of the world as "the reality of the self which we transfer into things" which "has nothing to do with independent reality," and the latter becomes perceptible only through total detachment.<sup>49</sup>

As with the Buddhist, Weil's detachment is an absence of both repulsion and attraction, for she speaks of the ability "to contemplate what cannot be contemplated (the affliction of another) without running away, and to contemplate the desirable without approaching."<sup>50</sup> It is with the images of nudity and death that she develops this "living neutrality," writing that:

The truth is not revealed except in  
nakedness and that nakedness is death,  
which means the rupture of all those  
attachments which for each human being  
constitute the reasons for living . . . .<sup>51</sup>

The detachment is also described as putting one's life into God even though this means that it is put "into that which we cannot touch in any way" and that doing so "is a death."<sup>52</sup> Indeed, it is precisely the death to one's own life, one's autonomy which is required.<sup>53</sup>

This detachment which makes it possible for us to accept death completely also sets the ground for our being brought "to the state of perfection"<sup>54</sup>--i.e. life as the movement of the divine life which is empty of self-life. This Weil calls "the

48. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 13

49. Ibid.

50. Weil, First and Last Notebooks, p. 71

51. Ibid.

52. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 99

53. Ibid.

54. Weil, Waiting on God, p. 152

forgiveness of debts"--unequivocally classifying attachment to personal life as undesirable and sinful. Our only valid existence is as God's love for himself through us which it is right that we should give him through the renunciation of that invalid existence he permits but begs from us.<sup>55</sup>

### Contemplation

Clearly the achievement of this detachment is going to take some substantial changes in attitudes and values, as the Buddhist found, and like them, she makes use of meditation which Weil calls "contemplation." Also this for her would seem to be of two kinds and reflects a division which the Theravada establish between Insight Meditation and Tranquility Meditation.<sup>56</sup> Thus on the one hand Weil recognises a contemplation of the world which will be the basis for our imitation of the order thereby discovered--that order which is thought by the only Son of God and which can only be seen as our becoming natural, and what we naturally are.<sup>57</sup> This kind of contemplation is how we are to understand "the supernatural destination of science."<sup>58</sup>

Such contemplation makes use of the analytical powers of the intellect and is analogous to Insight Meditation. It relies on thoroughness and honesty, not faith. Nothing lies outside its realm for it must contemplate everything that is--however initially appealing or revolting.<sup>59</sup> It looks "with a certain suspension of judgement" and indifference<sup>60</sup> in order to

55. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 28

56. Nyanaponika, The Heart of Buddhist Meditation, p. 102

57. Weil, Intimations of Christianity, p. 103

58. Ibid.

59. Weil, First and Last Notebooks, p. 71

60. Weil, Letter to a Priest, p. 12; Waiting on God, p. 35

achieve that honest analysis which must validate the truth of her vision--as it was the way she herself arrived at that vision.

Strictly speaking, however, Weil does not see this kind of contemplation as making discoveries, but "only good for servile tasks" like clearing the ground.<sup>61</sup> Its great weakness lies in a tendency toward building dogmatic systems rather than reducing them to their tell-tale component parts.<sup>62</sup> Thus Weil seems to wish to use this kind of contemplation not unlike Nagarjuna's use of śūnyatā as a negative dialectic to show the false existence of every "thing" which appears to be real, but in fact she knows that the intellect is rarely content to simply dismantle and naturally tends toward dogmatic constructions. Indeed, in the Theravada Abhidharma system we see precisely the two sides of Insight Meditation: The reduction of everything into its smallest meaningful unit to uncover its true nature; and the construction of detailed and complex interrelated units to illustrate the system dogmatically on a macrocosmic (e.g. the dhātus) as well as microcosmic (e.g. the dharmas) scale.

Weil therefore, also develops a kind of contemplation analogous to both Tranquility Meditation and prajñā. It is of the nature of a transrational insight, a revelatory experience which cannot be reduced to intellectual systematisation. In Weil's context this is "the soul's looking" and "it means that we have stopped for an instance to wait and to listen."<sup>63</sup> For

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61. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 13

62. Weil, Letter to a Priest, p. 65

63. Weil, Waiting on God, p. 140

such contemplation there exists only the void and the essential silence or "non-reply," but so fundamental is it that one's very life may represent its function.<sup>64</sup>

It is with this kind of contemplation that one is related to the dogmas of religious faith, for "they are things to be regarded from a certain distance with attention, respect and love."<sup>65</sup> Indeed, such dogmas before the analytical intellect of insight contemplation may often be revealed to have "strictly speaking no meaning whatever."<sup>66</sup> This means that if they are found to be productive to the soul's looking experience, their value is not in what they say but in what they do. Buddhism knows this characteristic of some verbal formulations very well and it is seen most clearly in the Zen koan and the Tantric mantra. It is hard to see how Weil could be saying anything other than this in her belief that:

The mysteries of the faith are degraded if they are made into an object of affirmation and negation, when in reality they should be an object of contemplation.<sup>67</sup>

Appropriately, as valid contemplation of the soul's looking type, we must assume that the soul is properly turned toward God during this and that therefore the flow of divine love is unobstructed. When Weil says that her adherence to the mysteries is love and not affirmation,<sup>68</sup> then, it has several levels of potential meaning. It is, insofar as the soul's

64. Weil, Intimations of Christianity, p. 198; First and Last Notebooks, p. 83

65. Weil, Letter to a Priest, p. 48

66. Ibid., pp. 48-49

67. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 117

68. Weil, Seventy Letters, p. 155



looking can be seen as the movement of self-love in the divine life, but a particular aspect of God's love for himself. It is also, however, insofar as this looking activity of the soul represents an aspect of a point in creation, a moment of love. Like *prajñā*, therefore, it is both the-real-and-the-knowledge-of-the-real in one non-dual union.<sup>69</sup> Contemplation of the mysteries in this manner is therefore but another way of speaking of a created point of God's self-love.

Taken as a whole, the two modes of contemplation which Weil conceives do not provide for the credal dogmatism of intellectual adherence. She allows only an obligation to direct one's attention--i.e. to contemplate either as a state of being (the soul's looking/God's self-loving), or as a neutral, detached intellectual enterprise of analysis. Each of the two has its proper role and character and prevents a one-sided approach to truth, demanding that the man who would engage in them be both a mystic and a scientist.<sup>70</sup>

There is also something of the epistemology behind the two truths theory of the Buddhists in this development by Weil. Her assertion that the fundamental question "why?" will be greeted by an essential silence<sup>71</sup> is akin to the realisation that insight and not verbal response will alone "answer" some questions. Likewise, when Weil speaks of the transcendental correlation of contradictories and its relationship to detachment<sup>72</sup> she recognises that on one level contradictories do

69. Murti, *op. cit.*, p. 330

70. Weil, Letter To a Priest, p. 39; Intimations of Christianity, p. 103

71. Weil, First and Last Notebooks, p. 83

72. Weil, Gravity and Grace, pp. 89 and 92

exist while on another they do not. This would explain many apparent contradictions in Weil's own thought which can be resolved if considered in the context of her whole system which recognises the phenomenal "world" on one level and the divine totality understood negatively on another.<sup>73</sup>

Finally, when Murti tells us that "the formless Absolute (śūnya) manifests itself as the concrete world" by means of "its phenomenalising aspect karuṇā"<sup>74</sup> we are inclined to contrast Weil's image of God's perpetual love for himself as the act of creation and decreation. Certainly in Weil creation is an act of God<sup>75</sup> but most of the world as man knows it is the work of man's imagination and as such a hindrance of the divine activity and ensnarement for man--even as saṃsāra with its illusions ensnares.

The work of the Bodhisattvas to release men from the illusory bonds is the work of karuṇā and likewise Weil conceives of a similar disentanglement which is achieved through a dismantling by man of all his illusory aspects--leaving nothing but the divine love. Indeed, neither Weil's God nor the Buddhists' Bodhisattvas are intent on turning the world into a paradise through effective reform, but rather do their saving work by eradicating the illusion which the world and men are.<sup>76</sup> Salvation, effected by the phenomenalising force of the Absolute is therefore a matter of removing something unreal and not a preservation of anything man knows himself to be.

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73. e.g. Weil, Waiting on God, pp. 131, 138, 139; Letter to a Priest, pp. 34-35; Gravity and Grace, p. 62; (especially note the intricacies of the issue of good in the world).

74. Murti, op. cit., p. 109

75. Weil, Waiting on God, p. 68

76. Weil, First and Last Notebooks, p. 100

The metaphysical nature of enlightenment reveals itself here, for Weil's "love . . . is light"<sup>77</sup> parallels the Mahayana identity of the compassion of the Dharmakāya with *prajñā*. The fully enlightened Bodhisattva is also one with the aspect of *karuṇā*.

The function of love or compassion in such a vision is clearly not, as Weil explicitly said, consolation or encouragement that the world will be made better<sup>78</sup> but rather on the contrary a way of seeing the world and oneself which causes both to give way to the absolute reality of "God" or "śūnyatā." It should be remembered however, that in this process the Buddhists believe suffering is dissolved through the realisation of its illusory nature while Weil integrates suffering into the very nature of the Godhead.

#### Summary

In the fragmentary meditations of Simone Weil seems hidden a vision of the world and man and God with analogies in Mahayana Buddhism. She portrays creation as a dynamic structure filled by man's imagination with illusory but seemingly existent stuff (including himself) which can however, by contemplation, be seen to possess the characteristics of suffering, impermanence and soullessness. Rightly understood creation is the emptiness bounded on one side by the divine self-emptying and on the other by the divine self-emptied. These two constitute opposite poles united into one whole by the mediation of the spirit, itself the dual embodiment of

77. Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 13

78. *Ibid.*, pp. 13 and 104

creation/decreation. Each man is a point on the line between these two extremes through which the movement of self-love and self-consummation flows--unless because of the evil of sin and error he has become an obstruction, thinking that he is, desirous of existence and good. As the latter his situation is inexpressibly tragic because incomparably wrong. His task is to turn himself and thereby destroy his self so that he might again be an authentic point in the nothingness which is not unreal only in that "compared with it, everything in existence is unreal."<sup>79</sup>

Weil does not, however, as we noted, possess a clear absolute such as śūnyatā although the word "God" when it refers to what is more properly termed the Godhead, encompasses all--the totality of Weil's negative vision. Still, there is no nirvāṇa to stand outside and offer solace to the awful claustrophobia her bipolar universe can arouse, for those characteristics of the world which the Buddhist would seek mastery of and freedom from, Weil recognises as aspects of the divine life which must therefore be affirmed and fully actualised. Her emptiness does not free but defines and obligates. Enlightened man is not identified with the absolute but with a point in the flow of divine love.

Consequently, Weil's system is closer to the Buddhist system if described at the level of active nirvāṇa--just short of the absolute (śūnyatā). She does not provide for its resolution in stillness even though she envisions that its change has no significance, accomplishing nothing, except its own

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79. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 13



perpetuation. She rejects the world created by man's imagination but not creation itself which is the deifugal or withdrawal movement balanced and neutralised ultimately by its reversal and the return of God to himself. Movement described as love is thus absolutised rather than stillness.

## CHAPTER 12: Focusing on the World

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

## Secularity

One of the most notable characteristics of the late fragments of Bonhoeffer with which we are concerned, is his desire to find God in the world as the world is encountered before a division into sacred and profane--or to put it otherwise, Bonhoeffer wishes to view the world as would a secular modern man and then say: This secular world shows the divine presence. Thus precisely in its ungodliness he asserts the presence of God and his nearness.<sup>1</sup>

This is however, to understand divine nearness and even God in a wholly new light and the revolution involved is not unlike the revolution introduced by the Mahayana when they identified nirvāṇa and saṃsāra with each other. It involves a complete reorientation of thought so that what one expects to see in viewing existence is drastically altered from the nature of previous expectations. Bonhoeffer was concerned that previously the Christian tradition had looked for God at those points where men felt their limitations: Death, weakness, ignorance, the mysterious. In the face of these he could "recognise" God and thus they not only said something about where God was to be found, but also something of what he was all about and what his relationship to man and his world was.

Bonhoeffer's suggestion is essentially that the tradition is wrong on both counts. First of all, God is no more in man's

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1. Bonhoeffer, op. cit., p. 124

weaknesses and ignorance than in his strengths and understanding.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, he is not just the numinous power outside that domain where we are at home and comfortable and God is an alien. If God is to be affirmed at all he must be affirmed as something which has no special domain or possession such as the opposite of the secular, immanent and profane. Indeed, the pairs secular/religious, immanent/transcendent, profane/sacred are made obsolete by what Bonhoeffer suggests. Man's realm and God's realm collapse into one as does the distinction between nirvāṇa and saṃsāra in Mahayana.

The danger which the polarisation reveals, is being felt by both Bonhoeffer and Mahayana in their modification--namely that the poles will be represented by good/bad, flee from/flee towards, authentic/inauthentic, worthwhile/not worthwhile. It was felt that nirvāṇa must not be thought of as something else than saṃsāra, a sort of alter-existence to which one could escape for the pleasant continuation of their saṃsaric self.<sup>3</sup> Since what one is, is only saṃsaric, there is nothing to go to nirvāṇa and therefore also no nirvāṇa to go to; and since everything is empty, one's saṃsaric self and nirvāṇa are the same thing--identifiable with each other.

Bonhoeffer saw the Christian church as offering God as a sort of refuge in the face of man's limits. To the extent that one experienced boundaries in one's living experience, to that extent one would be aware of God and his realm. Likewise such a man, if he was very aware of God, could doubtless come to

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2. Ibid., p. 104

3. Streng, op. cit., p. 75

prefer to pass over into the security of God's realm, free from the limitations which frustrate here. In continuous and subtle ways if not in conscious and fully directed ones, there could be an attempt to abandon the confines of the known for the freedom of the unknown. The danger of this dualism then is the danger of escapism.

That danger of escapism is itself the danger of seeing incorrectly what one wishes to escape from. Neither nirvāṇa nor God must, following the import of Bonhoeffer's and Mahayana's thought, prevent us from understanding the full nature of our existence, from knowing it for what it is and from making right use of it. Bonhoeffer's prison life set him in a new environment more lacking in contact with "God's realm" than any previous one he had known. There he did not attend church, nor at times read the Bible, but he did read such books as one on the worldview of physics and watch his secular companions for even a hint of awareness of transcendence.<sup>4</sup> In this new environment he began to acquire a new perspective.

The result of Bonhoeffer's new perspective was a questioning of the traditional segregation which lumped the sacred and religious with a transcendent God and the secular and profane with an immanent presence which was more an absence due to an abdication which permitted man his autonomous realms so long as due recognition existed that his autonomy was by a gracious loan which may be revoked at any time. Likewise, the Mahayana emphasised, through the identification of nirvāṇa and saṃsāra, nirvāṇa too could not be segregated. It was not a special kind

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4. Bonhoeffer, op. cit., pp. 54, 82, 79-80, 103-104



of reality in a special kind of place. Bonhoeffer was made aware of the error of segregation by the retreat of religion from his personal world while the Mahayana discovered it by the retreat of anything substantial from saṃsāra.

Thus the secular (Bonhoeffer usually used the term non-religious) functioned as did śūnyatā. Viewing the whole as secular, God becomes identifiable with the whole and thus with secularity. Viewing the whole as empty of beingness or substance, saṃsāra becomes identifiable with emptiness and thus with nirvāṇa. Obviously important differences exist between the two concepts and their functions, but there is a parallel effect: Each serves to shatter the validity of a segregating and polarising understanding of the ultimate value of their existence.

Also, for both Bonhoeffer and Mahayana, the destruction of the ultimate validity of the polar understanding reordered the question of value and worth. Thus Mahayana illuminated saṃsāra's full potential in a way which it was felt corrected the obscuration of that potential which occurred in Theravada thought.<sup>5</sup> Saṃsāra became as much the realm of the fully enlightened being as was nirvāṇa. Indeed, the fact that no distinction existed and saṃsāra was the realm where salvation is meaningful, meant that saṃsāra became more appropriate than nirvāṇa. The superficial effect of the śūnyatā concept was to re-evaluate both saṃsāra and nirvāṇa so as to bring them into alignment.

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5. cf. Smith, "The Ideal Social Order as Portrayed in the Chronicles of Ceylon," The Two Wheels of the Dhamma, p. 51 which suggests this criticism is illfounded.

By the same token, the recognition of the utter secularity of the world made it essential for the man who still wished to speak of God, to understand some essential link between God and secularity by which in turn his whole secular world gained a previously withheld value. Only through this technique can the rejection of the religious category's claim not amount to a rejection of that which the religious category claimed to possess.

Of course, the difficulty is whether or not God can exist apart from the polarity which identified him before. Śūnyatā as a negative dialectic might provisionally evaluate more highly saṃsāra and devalue nirvāṇa in relation to some overly simplified view of their difference, without losing its ultimate significance. Indeed, since its ultimate significance is really its ability to demonstrate the function of emptiness as infinitely applicable even to itself, nothing whatsoever can annul its supremacy. Thus the identity of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa only supports and reflects śūnyatā's significance.

When the segregation of God's realm from man's realm breaks down however, God ceases to be something clearly other than man and his world. A God identifiable with the world of man, fully integrated into it, is either no longer identifiable as himself or the world is no longer identifiable with itself. To say something was secular was to say something was not other than but one with us. To say something was religious or sacred was to identify it as somehow representative of something other than man's world. Insofar as Bonhoeffer was attempting to secularise God therefore, he was making it impossible for us to recognise God as a positive concept. God-realm and man-realm

merge into one new, unnamed realm. Mahayana could name it no-realm because Mahayana develops along the lines of a negative dialectic, but Bonhoeffer has nowhere else to go. This is what causes him to say that God is now the ungodly.

Bonhoeffer's situation is clearly not just the result of his rejection of the secular/religious polarity, but primarily the result of his preference for secularity over religiousness, because as we have said in comparing it to śūnyatā, what is secular lays claim to that by which the religious previously distinguished itself. This is in contrast to the atheist who denies that there is anything more divine in the religious than in the secular intending thereby to challenge the significance of divinity. Bonhoeffer is denying that there is anything more divine in the religious than in the secular, intending thereby to challenge the significance of the religious.

That living is thus a fully secular activity where the concept of God is not functional or meaningful is recognised by Bonhoeffer's affirmation that "before God and with him we live without God."<sup>6</sup> In an empirical and not an ontological sense, God is empty of meaning and purpose. God does not function-- but śūnyatā does. Secularity functions, but nirvāṇa and saṃsāra do not. Thus Bonhoeffer's Christian must be secular with the same urgency that Mahayana Buddhists must be śūnya-- i.e. attain prajñā. To realise each within the context of each one's system is the appropriate goal. Bonhoeffer denies that there is any ultimate truth in religion and religiousness, Mahayana denies that there is any ultimate truth in saṃsāra or nirvāṇa.

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6. Bonhoeffer, op. cit., p. 122

## Autonomy

From the individual's point of view, Bonhoeffer's positing of God in the secular non-religious every day stuff of life and the universe, raises the question of the significance of the Christian doctrines of Christ and salvation, for as he himself recognises, Christianity has aligned itself with religion against the secular and to deny the one threatens the other.<sup>7</sup> Inevitably, therefore, a drastic revolution takes place here too.

First of all, Bonhoeffer is consistent in his vision of autonomous man who lives without divine assistance<sup>8</sup> --i.e. wholly secular insofar as all that he is expected to be and to do is fully represented by the potential of the secular world. There are no supernatural forces, no miraculous interventions to be expected. Man is to consider his world as the wholeness from which he must complete any incompleteness which he may experience. This is not to say that he will not fail in the process, but only that there is no other way to success except on this principle. Men living without some other-worldly source of aid are living truly.

In this he is like the Buddhist who ultimately realises that the achievement of prajñā or the cessation of the dharma streams is of his own doing and no one else's. Nor does this vary from the Bodhisattva ideal if it is taken in the context of beings doing only what is "naturally" possible for beings to do. The doctrine of transcendent Buddhas shows a somewhat greater similarity to soteriological theism at this point,

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7. Ibid., p. 91 ff.

8. Ibid., p. 122



however, for it stretches the analogy nearly to the breaking point to make the desired achievements dependent on each man's ultimate unity with the Dharmakāya which from great love and mercy produces the transcendent Buddhas. Yet even so, the function of divine assistance is never so absolute, so essential and final as, for example, in the orthodox Christian doctrine of redemption.

Specifically facing the non-soteriological nature of what he is saying, Bonhoeffer cites the disappearance of interest in an individual salvation and asserts that there is no need for "a last refuge in the eternal from earthly tasks and difficulties."<sup>9</sup> What meaning salvation has must relate to this world and not to any other. What happens to man must happen to him in relation to it. It is both the realm in which he has meaning and the realm in which he must make that meaning and salvation is salvation to it and bears its full meaning in the context of living in it--i.e. before death or extinction.<sup>10</sup>

Again, the parallel with Buddhist understanding is striking. Buddhist salvation is precisely salvation in saṃsāra--never salvation from saṃsāra. Just as man is a being in need of being freed from saṃsāra--something which both happens in it and continues in it--so man is a being in need of realising the full potential of secular existence. Such a realisation is prajñā, enlightenment, nirvāṇa (in the Theravada sense of sopādhiseṣa-nirvāṇa); and Bonhoeffer's understanding of salvation. All represent a reality of which one can say:

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9. Ibid., pp. 94 and 112

10. Ibid., p. 112

This is to realise the full potential of phenomenal reality available to the individual man.

As with the Buddhist however, Bonhoeffer could scarcely be understood to be suggesting thereby something which is seen by the individual as capable of being fulfilled by the individual independently of his awareness of other men and other sentient beings. The truest vision of salvation, therefore, is a social one. For the Theravada this means that one's consciousness must be structured so as to operate by the lines of love for all creatures as well as the realisation that in bringing the flow of their own streams of dharma to an end they are thereby taking a step which they are responsible to take and should in no way avoid taking toward the eventual cessation of all streams of dharma and for the prevention of further suffering in their own. For the Mahayana this means that each man is one with saṃsāra and will not have attained the final perfection until all of saṃsāra is perfected. Of course, for Mahayana this also means that each man's path is that of the Bodhisattva rather than that of the arahant.

For Bonhoeffer it has to do with the proper orientation, order and quality of life in the secular world, but there is no clue that he understands or envisions this in a utopian manner. On the contrary, Bonhoeffer's analysis of the world--the only world, the secular world--selects suffering as central to the enterprise. The suffering about which he writes is intimately related to the concept of weakness and therefore implies the deterministic nature of the world, the vast complexity and magnitude of its forces, the relative and even ultimate inability of man to substantially alter the nature of its running and thus his existence within it.

There will be no utopia where man can be himself yet free of death, pain, suffering of all kinds, because God and man are both secular--i.e. they are both of this world and that means being weak and suffering. The meaning of the Christ event is precisely this. God is weak and suffering in the world--he can do no more than man in the world.<sup>11</sup> If there is anything he is not, it is a being or force or reality beyond and outside the world which by a trick of the incarnation is preparing to translate man to another realm.

In fact, Bonhoeffer's vision of the Christ event is not a vision of it as a message of God's identity with man and man's existence but as a message to man of exactly what his identity as a man is and how he is to exist. The symbols of the Christ event show man that the way to live is as powerless and suffering, identifying with God thereby rather than God's identifying with man. Thus to be Christian is to follow Christ's lead, as he was God saying: This is how I am and this is how you are to be--weak and suffering. Such weakness and suffering is watching with God, as in Gethsemane, and this is the central meaning and substance of life.<sup>12</sup>

Such affirmation of suffering does seem to be the recognition of it as an essential characteristic of the world and as related somehow to the deterministic nature of its structures against which man is unable to effectively struggle. Acceptance, but more than acceptance--identification--with these realities is required. Consequently, Bonhoeffer would seem to be

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11. Ibid., pp. 123-124

12. Ibid., p. 122

sanctifying a unique kind of Christian detachment which plunges into the world and anticipates a living experience characterised by suffering and weakness. It does this for no reward other than the fact of its thereby identifying with God.

This is not the Mahayana acceptance of suffering by which the Bodhisattva intends to aid other creatures in their evolution toward enlightenment, for there is no *prajñā* to release men from it. Nor is it Theravada detachment which is based on a basic conviction that *samsāra* is fundamentally undesirable and suffering is one of its elements to which one must become detached. The Theravada detach themselves from their suffering, whereas Bonhoeffer's detachment is such that by it man can suffer in identification with God freed from visions and dreams of rescue from existence in some supernatural salvation.

Yet Bonhoeffer does speak of conquest of power and space which God achieves by his suffering and weakness.<sup>13</sup> Such a more positive prognosis or interpretation of what is going on bears no direct relation to the individual suffering Christian, although it may to the whole body of suffering Christians--the Church.<sup>14</sup> With no development of this thought from Bonhoeffer before his death it seems proper only to suggest that he is referring to some sense of control through having risen above and somehow, out of one's own resources, transcended all that the world can do. The phenomenon of psychological mastery even in the midst of physiological trauma is familiar to self-mastery training. One who expects to suffer and is ready to do

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13. Ibid., p. 122

14. Ibid., p. 80



so, for example, cannot be threatened or intimidated or injured by the occurrence of suffering in any way which he has not already fully integrated. Likewise one who expects to die and has come to know that when or how it occurs is an irrelevancy, cannot be startled by the appearance or character of his imminent death. Such a person we would say, is "on top" of his situation and it is perhaps this kind of conquest to which Bonhoeffer refers.

Bonhoeffer may therefore be saying that God ultimately is victory insofar as it is a case of the world not doing anything to him he does not desire. It is a case of God choosing suffering and weakness and death in the world. Man accepts it only, but God chooses it and therein lies the crucial difference. God is ultimately in control of his situation and this alone constitutes his help to man.<sup>15</sup>

#### William Hamilton

Perhaps the most fruitful development by Hamilton is to be seen in his move toward a world-affirming mode of Christianity which attempts to establish itself without the baggage of a faith-supported dogma or a specific eschatological hope for the future. Thus love becomes the key to his claim that the life he lives is Christian and the essential ingredient of his world-affirmation. He understands the radical movement to which he sees himself as belonging, as a movement from institutional religion with its rituals, practices, account of history, proclamations about God, to one of identification with the world and participation in its activities.<sup>16</sup>

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15. Ibid., p. 122

16. Hamilton, "American Theology," op. cit., p. 7; "The Death of God Theologies Today," op. cit., p. 37

On whether the world in its profane development with which he now casts his lot is a prize or a problem, Hamilton must in the main be seen as accepting the latter. This is so even considering the optimism which he champions<sup>17</sup> and the almost ecstatic utterances about "Jesus in the world,"<sup>18</sup> for the overall tone is one of mixed pain and possibility. Hamilton's secularity is neither utopian nor pessimistic. He writes about the suffering of the world<sup>19</sup> but there is a moderation in his tone which seems to reflect an acceptance of its inevitability without consistently elevating it--or indeed any other characteristic except the world's natural secularity--to a position of being a fundamental and absolute characteristic.

In his development, Hamilton works without metaphysical categories for the most part, intent upon the problem of describing the radical Christian's joint alienation from the substance of the tradition and instead his citizenship in the world. Despite its disruptive effect upon all traditional Christian thought, Hamilton concerns himself with expressing and formulating the nature of Christianity without its familiar religious materials wherever possible. His symbols of Christ and God being no longer sustainable in the worldview of traditional dogma, he attempts a rejection of the latter and utilisation of the former: Christ infused into the world to lend value and meaning to the secular stuff of human experience.

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17. Hamilton, "The New Optimism," op. cit., p. 159 ff.; "The Shape of a Radical Theology," op. cit., p. 75

18. Hamilton, "The Death of God Theologies Today," op. cit., p. 49 ff.

19. Hamilton, The New Essence of Christianity, p. 42, pp. 91-92; "Banished from the Land of Unity," op. cit., p. 63

It would seem such an enterprise is far removed from Buddhism. The world is taken as man's only home and life as being at home. Neither heaven nor hell beckon the radical from this realm of his being, and within that realm there is no struggle for escape, nor progress toward a divine order. Christianity enlightens the world-dweller on matters of living in the world's center--the focus of his concern as his back is turned upon all kinds of "boundary situations." Thus Hamilton does not engage in analyses which might provoke something like the Buddhist understanding of dukkha, anatta, anicca but neither does he forecast progression into some Kingdom of God. He lacks a soteriology largely because he posits nothing from which man must be saved. Man is a world-dweller and dwelling in the world is his sole occupation however ambiguous such existence is.

The only hint of a numinous quality or religious tension in Hamilton's writings is in the unwavering vigor with which he points Christians deeply involved in God and the church away from these distractions toward "the world, worldly life, and the neighbor as the bearer of the worldly Jesus."<sup>20</sup> What meaning divinity had in the past is rejected or assimilated but in either case is denied its character as an authentic external norm which by its very nature condemns the world to dependency and inadequacy. Hamilton, like the other secularists, experienced the implosion of Christian values by which all other-worldliness was emptied into this world which becomes the new center.

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20. Hamilton, "The Death of God Theologies Today," op. cit., p. 37

A hint of the Bodhisattva's ultimate concern for the salvation of all sentient beings bound in samsara is reflected in the new center to Hamilton's vision. That is, when Hamilton makes other men the center of the Christian's concern and life, we feel that theme is highly reminiscent of the full import of the Bodhisattva's vow. Such energy as flows through the Christian and the Bodhisattva is to be functional for others. Hamilton however lives for the world because it is the world and his task is to live for it. The Bodhisattva of course intends the release of all sentient beings in saṃsāra from its illusory alienation from nirvāṇa.

Hamilton has not developed for us the significance of Christ being hidden in the world and our consequent ability to become Jesus and form Christ among men in the world.<sup>21</sup> Certainly these themes however remind one of the belief in Mahayana that all men are really Buddhas because the Buddha nature is really hidden in all men and thus enlightenment is not a creation of it but the utilisation of it.<sup>22</sup> The Buddha nature however transforms man's existence when it becomes activated and Hamilton does not tell us what the effect of Christ's universal reality is.

One wonders if Hamilton intends the universalised Christ to represent the highly devotional ideal of the Dharmakāya, for example, thereby making the profane but a mask for the sacred.<sup>23</sup> If such is the case, again it is not developed for Hamilton

21. Ibid., pp. 49-50

22. Conze, Buddhist Scriptures, pp. 139-144

23. Hamilton, "The Death of God Theologies Today," op. cit., p. 49



never in tone or content strays from the seemingly unalterably secular and profane character of his world, so that by default his Jesus in the world must represent the profanisation of the sacred and not the reverse. On this level, Hamilton can only reflect a strong contrast of tone with Buddhism.

#### Summary

Bonhoeffer and Hamilton represent an effort to transfer the values of God and Jesus and Christ symbols into the world-at-large. There is on their part an effort, in other words, at sacramentalising the secular which seems, as we have just seen, more effective as the opposite. Neither wants to get caught up in talking about the way the world is in a metaphysical sense, nor in talking about anything except the world and man as a part of it. Yet their practice of using Christian materials in this activity surely indicates that what they want to say can be said and must be said in these forms, indicating further that secularity incorporates some of what came and still comes from the religious heritage of man.

## CHAPTER 13: A Functional Problem

Gabriel Vahanian

## Iconoclasm

Gabriel Vahanian believes in some transcendent entity upon which man is dependent for his own existence and to which man owes his allegiance.<sup>1</sup> Vahanian also knows that it would be unknown to man were it not somehow also immanent and this immanence he posits as God's reality "attested in the world and its empirical phenomena through the structures of human existence, of man's works and his word."<sup>2</sup> Thus Vahanian represents a twofold emphasis: The transcendent and culture. The first is the unknown realm of God, the second is the realm of God's creation in his own imageless image. Whatever "God" means to Vahanian must include something of both realms.

Buddhism and Christianity probably differ most significantly at precisely the point of the transcendent realm. In Mahayana thought the meaning of everything must be arrived at through the ultimate device for understanding it: Śūnyatā. In Vahanian's view nothing assumes its proper perspective short of its right relationship to the Transcendent. Śūnyatā clearly creates no thing but it does reveal the ultimage no-thing-ness of everything which is. The Transcendent is, on the other hand, that which establishes the thingness of everything. Creation is dependent but it is not empty, it is other than the transcendent but it is not devoid of structure for accepting the transcendent.

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1. Vahanian, The Death of God, pp. 14-15

2. Vahanian, No Other God, p. 47

In Theravada dharma-theory, nirvāṇa exists apart from the momentary dharmas which constitute saṃsāra, and in its quiescence and eternality it differs from them. Again it does not create and sustain the momentary dharmas, representing instead only a "transcendent Other" wholly beyond saṃsāra and all of its formations. Yet what the dharma of nirvāṇa and the realm of the transcendent other require is an uncompromising iconoclasm. To even thus describe them is to place them utterly beyond further of man's concepts of them and every attempt which he would make to bring them down within the scope of his existence.

Throughout both Mahayana and Theravada the difference between Vahanian's transcendent entity and their unspeakable ultimates is seen most clearly in the Christian (perhaps even Western) concept of "creator."<sup>3</sup> Even if śūnyatā provisionally allows the whole to be represented as the Dharmakāya or active-nirvāṇa and thus describes it as "divine reality," the empirical world is not anything other than illusion which with the correction of that illusion will dissolve into emptiness.<sup>4</sup>

Śūnyatā, the dharma of nirvāṇa and the transcendent deity, share an ultimate ineffability and require that care be taken in order that they do not become erroneously substituted by some idolatrous attempt to grasp them intellectually. Therefore śūnyatā is available only through prajna and on the level of discursive thought must be turned upon itself to protect and remain true to its ultimate significance by the denial of any

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3. Bloefeld, The Way of Power, p. 213

4. Ibid., pp. 51-62

reality other than śūnya reality in all that śūnyatā means to the minds of men.<sup>5</sup> Likewise the dharma of nirvāṇa can only be ascribed negative values and to make it a desired goal would be to create an image of it which would prevent its significance from being realised.<sup>6</sup>

Amid this complex of linguistic, logical and verbal inadequacies stands also the transcendent deity Vahanian defends. In it he gives iconoclasm a function not unlike the dialectical use of śūnyatā. Thus he says:

Iconoclasm is, for all practical purposes, the essential ingredient of monotheism as understood in the Biblical tradition. Without this element, faith in God loses its indispensable character, and can result neither in radical commitment to God nor an equally radical and iconoclastic involvement in the world.<sup>7</sup>

Precisely because God cannot be conceptualised Vahanian sees that "religion and its gods are . . . so many screens, so many obstacles between the living God and man."<sup>8</sup> Thus the only proper position is the consistent rejection of all images of God which claim to represent the one true God--it is that methodological atheism which characterises Vahanian's position.<sup>9</sup>

The result of an iconoclastic attitude toward the idolatrous pretenses which religion is responsible for is here surprisingly analogous to the result of prajñā. By prajñā therefore one empties the gods and every other pretender to

5. Murti, op. cit., p. 356

6. Conze, Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies, p. 211

7. Vahanian, Wait Without Idols, p. 26

8. Ibid., p. 230

9. Vahanian, No Other God, p. 82



absoluteness of any substance or being which would allow the place they claim.<sup>10</sup> Vahanian expects man to be able to see that there is a God but man can have no God, just as the Buddhist affirms that man can attain an insight which will show him the falsity of the gods he worships, yet also the true nature of his own status. The ultimage effect of śūnyatā upon the religious structures of man can be no less deflationary for them than the effects of iconoclasm on those same structures, despite the fact that Vahanian maintains the reality of God by means of that iconoclasm.

For Vahanian however, this serves as a barrier which must cause us to turn around and accept the significance of creation, for him an ultimate one and not an illusory one. Although the whole of human experience continues to be understood iconoclastically<sup>11</sup> this does not empty it of meaning but only defines the limitations and structures of that meaning. God is thus not a "goal" any more than is nirvāṇa, but his ultimate reality prevents even the reality of the world from being treated as a substitute for him, albeit the proper and divinely constructed environment for man.

The task which Vahanian feels each man is confronted with is the task of living iconoclastically in God's creation. Religion insofar as it speaks and acts in a manner consistent with faith in transcendence succeeds in this but insofar as it puts forward a concept of God it fails.<sup>12</sup> Secularity is the realm in which this is done so that religion cannot justify its

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10. cf. Bloefeld, op. cit., p. 178; Conze, Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies, pp. 46-47 (n. item 9).

11. Vahanian, No Other God, p. 34

12. Vahanian, The Death of God, p. 36

separation of itself from the world. This is all part of the iconoclasm which desacralises the world and dedivinises nature,<sup>13</sup> however, and the function of uncovering God in the world of man. Iconoclastic religion never gives God to man for that is what it denies is possible, rather it gives man his own image which is no less his own and proper image by virtue of its being shared with God in some way man cannot know.

#### Anthropology

Iconoclastic religion therefore is more anthropological than theological for it tells man what God is not (namely anything which claims to be God) and what he himself (man) is. That the icon of God is irrecoverably hidden in the icon of man<sup>14</sup> (man knows his own image but not God's which he can affirm only iconoclastically) is the secret of man's valid existence and its ultimately dependent nature. Man is made in the image of God but neither man nor the rest of creation is divine.

Vahanian understands the incarnation as the unknown seeking the known which is the reverse of the known seeking the unknown--a process of which the inevitable result is the disparagement of all that is creaturely.<sup>15</sup> It is therefore the authentication of man but not by man--rather by God from without.<sup>16</sup> As such it constitutes the "crisis of religion" because it shows up its failure to measure man's goodness and ignorance and make man like God.<sup>17</sup> The incarnation does this

13. Vahanian, No Other God, p. 8

14. Ibid., p. 60

15. Vahanian, Wait Without Idols, p. 145

16. Ibid., p. 138

17. Ibid.

by virtue of repeating the image of God available to man as the image of man; and demonstrating the image of man as combining both involvement in the world and commitment to God.<sup>18</sup> These are one, not two as Vahanian sees them, and thus, while the world is truly secular and not divine, it is "the theater of God's glory," and secularity is "the only religious mode of being."<sup>19</sup>

To invest the present and immanent "with the attributes of the eternal and transcendent" is, in Vahanian's view, the error of religiosity,<sup>20</sup> however, which clearly shows what the incarnation is not. Thus the incarnation is not a shortcut to God since one must talk about God to talk about Jesus but as one can only speak iconoclastically about both God and man, Jesus too is subject to the pervasive iconoclasm.<sup>21</sup> Thus Vahanian tells us affirmatively only that:

The incarnation means God's proximity to man, his presentness to all that is created. It means that God does not turn his back on this world, and that man must not either.<sup>22</sup>

Jesus is not therefore, a judge who will separate "the elect from the reprobate"<sup>23</sup> but rather that which points "to every man's inseparability from God's presence, even if that presence is so stifling, so doubtful, that it is abysmally felt as an absence."<sup>24</sup>

18. Vahanian, No Other God, p. 8

19. Ibid., pp. 8-9

20. Vahanian, The Death of God, p. 67

21. Vahanian, No Other God, p. 34

22. Vahanian, Wait Without Idols, p. 127

23. Vahanian, The Death of God, p. 25

24. Vahanian, Wait Without Idols, p. 132

What this means is that man fails the iconoclastic ideal whenever he turns to a search for the eternal and transcendent. To say that nirvāṇa is and that it is not a goal, or to say that all is śūnyatā but that śūnyatā itself is not something in which one can finally find being and permanence, and thus neither is it a goal, properly speaking, is perhaps parallel to this insight of Vahanian's. Vahanian however, clearly implies a transcendence which relates to man--indeed even gives him his existence--and the clear definition of man's place and the nature of God's presence in it does not abrogate this duality.

It seems one would have to say that man is in the image of God by virtue of the separate existence from the transcendent which he is allowed yet that this somehow implies that the present and immanent is thereby related to the transcendent which remains inconceivable to man by virtue of its own ultimate autonomous and truly independent being. The dualism is complete because of the authenticity of man's realm and the inavailability of God's realm, but it is incomplete by virtue of what is required from God to sustain man's authenticity--namely creation and incarnation.

Samsāra in Mahayana thought is denied authentic existence even of a conditional type by virtue of its empty status. Vahanian on the other hand, although he has no available God, witnesses to the fact of the transcendent through the definition of man's world as the result of creation and scene of incarnation. By virtue of the incarnation creation is related to the transcendent--not in a manner which gives it access to the transcendent but only to its own realm. Relatedness does not dissolve the duality as it does in Mahayana thought, where it



is viewed as an infinite relatedness and thus ultimately one, although always a one which is viewed as śūnya.<sup>25</sup>

The situation in which Vahanian views man is perhaps somewhat analogous in this context to Theravada dharma-theory, recognising the discrepancy caused by the absence of any relationship between nirvāṇa and the conditioned, momentary dharmas. It still is the fact that the Theravada believe that the world of the momentary dharmas does have an independent existence, that that is the world of saṃsāra and the only one in which man can purposefully exist--albeit only in the sense that he is a composition of dharmas. Also the dharma of nirvāṇa is unavailable to man as man. It is transcendent and inconceivable. The Theravada can not properly see nirvāṇa as some place in which they will achieve their own salvation just as Vahanian asserts that the world is the scene of man's proper existence. Man's realm is not thereby granted a transcendent value but its own proper value is thereby fully recognised.

Nor does Vahanian's recognition of the divinely appointed but not divinely characterised authenticity of creation amount to a deification which would parallel the Mahayana identification of saṃsāra with nirvāṇa by means of their shared śūnyatā. Thus Vahanian's secularity underlines the importance of man's full acceptance of his world--even while distinguishing between the right acceptance which embodies an iconoclastic faith in transcendence and a wrong acceptance which would not only accept but enthrone the world as a self-sustaining reality.

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25. Streng, op. cit., pp. 97 and 159

There is also a significant parallel with both forms of Buddhism's emphasis on right insight or understanding and knowledge, in Vahanian's recognition that how one understands himself and his world can make all the difference between man fulfilling what is expected of him and not doing so. Thus the task of religious man is not only to demonstrate a consistent iconoclasm but also to act as "the avant-garde of society, as the axis of culture"<sup>26</sup> in the formation of a "cultural will"<sup>27</sup> faithful to an iconoclastic faith in transcendence. To fail in this activity would be the misinterpretation of that word which is "the image of an imageless reality."<sup>28</sup>

The religious expression of God speaking through the world and man responding with an iconoclastic secularity reflects the only numinous and mystical quality of Vahanian's highly sociological and critical development. This is experienced by his readers most fully in his analysis of "the word" and communication. Thus Vahanian writes:

The word is what brings into evidence the reality of the world, and does so by expressing the verbal nature of reality.<sup>29</sup>

This represents God's ongoing relationship to the world as creator for "the world is what takes place in and through the word," and for Vahanian this means that "without the word the world is powerless."<sup>30</sup>

Even the words of man's communication are not bearers of a definite sense, of a content of ideas, but are rather "the

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26. Vahanian, No Other God, p. 99

27. Vahanian, "The Future of Christianity," op. cit., p. 265

28. Vahanian, No Other God, p. 56

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

ambiguous Yes and No" and the translation of the text of communion.<sup>31</sup> Language is symbolic, Vahanian asserts, "and can communicate only where there is communion."<sup>32</sup> Such a vision sacramentalises man's struggle to express in speech and action his religiousness and his secularity in such a way that he is also in communion (dialogue) with God who is "speaking the world" in a sense. In such a world the Kingdom of God would be realised.

Buddhism does not readily offer an analogy to this kind of communicating transcendence and immanence. Its affirmation of the authenticity and value of the world along with a real transcendent which will always stand over and against its creation is quite alien to the Buddhist intuition of the nature of reality. Never would *samsāra* be accorded this kind of worth by the Theravada nor this kind of finality by the Mahayana. Never would *nirvāṇa* be accorded this kind of relatedness by the Theravada nor *śūnyatā* this kind of limited and conditional interpretation.

Thus we can note that, while recognising that salvation must be worked out within *samsāra* and utilising only what is inherent in it, Theravada would still never evaluate *samsara* in an inherently positive manner as does Vahanian. Likewise, while equating *samsāra* with *nirvāṇa* under the dialectic of *śūnyatā*, Mahayana would never concede the autonomy to *samsāra* which Vahanian posits in creation. The partial parallels such as the mutual inavailability of a real absolute resulting from

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31. Ibid., p. 51

32. Ibid.

iconoclasm and a dialectic of emptiness, can never alter the deep discontinuity on the fundamental levels of the two visions.

### Dorothee Sölle

Sölle has attempted to reserve a place for theism with her representationalism, for it retains God while removing the problem of theism. The nearest equivalent in Buddhism would be those beings which ~~is~~ emanate from the Dharmakāya to teach the Dharma to those for whom the Dharmakāya is inconceivable because of the delusion of saṃsāra by which they are bound. This is not however, a true representationalism by any stretch of the imagination and the similarity of function is not sufficient to justify a full correlation with Sölle's Christ. Such beings in Buddhism are as ultimately unreal as those to whom they go--they are projections and not representations in her precisely established meaning.<sup>33</sup>

It is however, of note that Sölle posits an ultimate disappearance of the representation, suggesting in the future a new relation between man and that which Christ represents to man.<sup>34</sup> The "new earth" of such a situation will also complete the process of our being represented to God which thereby may annul the finality of death.<sup>35</sup> Solle's eschatological hope<sup>36</sup> would seem to deny the finality of impermanence and soullessness which the Buddhist would affirm and suggests the Christian vision of personal continuance. That she ultimately means anything quite so traditional seems highly unlikely, however,

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33. Solle, op. cit., p. 20

34. Ibid., p. 97

35. Ibid., p. 42

36. Ibid., p. 97



given her overall modern and secular tone and concerns. Nor can one see how representation can preserve within it the orthodox Christian doctrine of bodily resurrection.

This definitely constitutes a problem in Sölle's thought although we take her here not to suggest ultimately a solution to man's finitude which would make it impossible to take it as including a real death. While representation is double-edged, God's "death" is a manner of speaking because of the cultural condition of the absolute whereas man's death is wholly existential--i.e. real. Consequently while in this area Sölle sounds most like traditional Christianity and least like Buddhism, we cannot see how she can ultimately align herself with the orthodox Christian position.

#### Summary

Vahanian and Sölle must reflect a situation in which the vast bulk of men and their culture are subject to an incorrect worldview and understanding of reality which makes the correct one unavailable. Vahanian suggests that an analysis of the world in which the whole culture shares will--or at least can--reveal both the correct vision of the world and of mankind. Solle offers a dogmatic device to "see man through" the time of blindness. Buddhism knows both techniques to correct wrong knowledge: Analysis, which in Buddhism reveals the impermanence of everything or its emptiness; and a dogmatic device in the form of the theory of dharmas or the concept of śūnyatā.

While in Vahanian's view the transcendent is displaced by an iconoclastically motivated methodological atheism, and in Sölle's it is temporally displaced into the future, Buddhism

displaces its transcendence beyond all opinions and thought processes (Mahayana) or beyond the world of change (Theravada). For all however, the world then becomes critical as the matrix for man's response to his reality.

The most significant aspect of Vahanian and Sölle's thought however, is that they would insist that the world is adequate and sufficient, whatever the difficulties of properly understanding its meaning. Its autonomy has been established in the sense that no direct intervention of the transcendent is possible or necessary. Thus in Sölle the seeds of the future are present in the here-and-now, God-is-dead stuff of the world just as in Vahanian the creation as creation is already the complete object of the Transcendent's relations even if on man's part this requires a dynamic development and history of this awareness.

## CHAPTER 14: The Atheistic Analysis

Paul Van Buren

## Methodology

Van Buren is a secularist who is not so intent on describing what God is doing in the world as he is in understanding what man is doing when talking about God. In this process he begins from the experience of humanity and from reflection upon that experience--a perspective he defends even in the face of Karl Barth's criticism of it.<sup>1</sup> He seems to feel himself speaking for a segment of contemporary mankind which he calls variously modern man, secular man, and religionless man,<sup>2</sup> which has difficulty with much religious language.

The nature of Van Buren's secularity is, at least on one level, less a matter of theology than a matter of inherited worldview or cultural disposition. Within this context Van Buren does not offer an apologetic for the secular realm but rather draws attention to the pervasive and unavoidable character of it. Thus he speaks of the secular Christian trying to understand his religion in a secular manner; of the modern man who is inside and not outside the church; of the religionless man to whom the distinction of the gospel as the proclamation of God's reaching down to rescue man as opposed to religion which is man reaching up to find God, is a meaningless distinction.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Mehta, op. cit., p. 54 (the author quotes Van Buren from an interview with him).
  2. Van Buren, The Secular Meaning of the Gospel, pp. 11, 84 and 157
  3. Ibid., p. 84

Consistently throughout his writings, Van Buren is then concerned with speaking about religious matters in a manner appropriate to men who are fundamentally secular, by which he means that they insist even religious verbalisations if they are to be meaningful to them must reflect their perspective (which by implication is necessarily different from the religious one). He thus is not asking for the acceptance of a proclamation from another cultural set, but simply that religion not be in some special category over against modern man. Rather, if he were religious at all, modern man could be so only in some manner faithful to the meaning of his underlying secularity.

In this sense there is an empiricism and rationalism about Van Buren's approach which is not unlike a well established theme in Theravada Buddhism especially insofar as one confines himself to the immediate approach to the Buddhist claims. Thus we are told that the teaching of Buddhism is verifiable and not confined to one time or culture.<sup>4</sup> The Buddhists believe that Buddhist teaching may be individually and personally tested and does not require any more of an initial commitment of faith than is required to make the serious attempt at verification.

However, this affirmation of the verifiability of religious meaning or even of the discoverable character of verifiable religious meaning must be set in a context for both Buddhism and Van Buren. Thus for both there is a quality of realism about the multitude of views and opinions which men believe they have verified rationally. Van Buren speaks of the

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4. Conze, Buddhist Meditation, p. 49; Jayatilleke, op. cit., p. 390



necessity of seeing things "in a certain way without feeling obliged to say that this is the only way in which they can be seen,"<sup>5</sup> and he also speaks of the effects of a pluralistic and relativistic world upon the category of the absolute which has thereby been dissolved.<sup>6</sup> He recognises that in the world where truth-systems are considered language games, "there could be no one game that was the game."<sup>7</sup>

Buddhism too recognised that the proliferation of views and opinions indicated the very great limitations of the rational mind of man where formulation and verification of ultimate truths was concerned. Thus it ranked lowest among a postulated three degrees of knowledge, mere opinions empirically based and affected by deep biases within men; placing the results of scientific and philosophical reflection which were at least partially objective as somewhat safer but by no means at the top--a place reserved for illumination characterised by "the identity of the mind knowing the object known."<sup>8</sup> Also the Buddha is cited as recognising that the method behind conceptual knowledge plays a more important part in its dependability than the "so-called 'ideas' or opinions (ditthi), beliefs and disbeliefs" which people held.<sup>9</sup>

In this same context it is interesting to note Van Buren's interest in what kind of questions were being asked and even in the act of questioning itself.<sup>10</sup> He came to feel, for example, that the questions to which the classical proofs for the

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5. Van Buren, Theological Explorations, pp. 41-42

6. Van Buren, "Theology in the Context of Culture," Frontline Theology, Peerman (editor), p. 47

7. Ibid.

8. Govinda, op. cit., p. 41

9. Ibid., p. 40

10. Van Buren, Theological Explorations, p. 7

existence of God were an answer, were not properly phrased to be answered.<sup>11</sup> Anselm for example, might well speak of Absolute Reality but the modern secular man would not speak in such words, meaning that Anselm's question would no longer be acceptable.<sup>12</sup> Traditional answers about God are therefore useless insofar as the questions they answered are invalid.

Buddhism too has a deep motif of rejecting certain questions for a variety of reasons such as their ultimate irrelevance to what really is relevant to man or their improper formulation.<sup>13</sup> Thus while some questions required categorical or analytical responses, others could only be "answered" with a counter question or set completely aside.<sup>14</sup>

Van Buren's abiding passion for man's linguistic life and its implications also is reminiscent of the theme in the Madhyamikan school reflected by Nagarjuna. It is much like that of the language analysts who insist that:

Words and expression patterns are simply practical tools of human life, which in themselves do not carry intrinsic meaning and do not necessarily have meaning by referring to something outside the language system.<sup>15</sup>

Śūnyatā, as Streng points out, functioning for Nagarjuna as a denial "that an ontological structure in itself exists corresponding to any mental concept or rational structure," brought Mahayana in this context in line with such men as Ludwig Wittgenstein and P. F. Strawson.<sup>16</sup> Van Buren aligned himself

11. Mehta, op. cit., p. 53 (quoting Van Buren)

12. Van Buren, Theological Explorations, pp. 38 and 40

13. Smart, Doctrine and Argument in Indian Philosophy, p. 47

14. Jayatilleke, op. cit., p. 281

15. Streng, op. cit., p. 139

16. Ibid., p. 142

with the same position in his acceptance of the essentials of their understanding of "language games" and his prolonged inability to identify anything as "God" if by that one means a transcendent absolute being.

In this light Van Buren must be seen as departing from an understanding of the matter like that of the Theravada dharma theory metaphysics with the effectively transcendent absolute of nirvāṇa. He is, therefore, more in alignment with Mahayana. Here however he differs in that he is willing to allow that the problems connected with the linguistic analysts theories are likely to be of concern to only some persons, whereas Nagarjuna believed the similar theories by which he operated effect "the salvation of all existing beings."<sup>17</sup> Van Buren's inherent relativism creates an atmosphere of uncertainty and exploration which speaks about "some men" and possible ways of expressing what seems to matter.<sup>18</sup> For Nagarjuna the significance of universal emptiness relativised everything in an effectively absolute manner not uncongenial to the evangelistic fervor Mahayana Buddhism frequently shows.<sup>19</sup>

If however, one accepts that Van Buren would not follow the Theravada in its metaphysics, there still remains that similarity in the aspects of methodology of concern to us here. Thus Theravada methodology recognises that the method of verifying its metaphysics precedes full acceptance of them and is thus able to share an understanding of the all too fallible

17. Streng, op. cit., p. 142

18. Van Buren, Theological Explorations, p. 170; The Edges of Language, p. 149

19. Smart, Doctrine and Argument in Indian Philosophy, pp. 54-55; Conze, Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies, p. 77; Murti, op. cit., p. 349

nature of cognition left to its own devices. Theravada would go on, as we have seen, to prescribe meditation as the best method for verifying its view of the world. Van Buren, true to the ultimately personal nature of truth which his relativism forces upon him, must content himself with an exposition of some of the language games or uses of language which he finds useful.

Thus certain aspects of methodology are shared in common by Van Buren and the Buddhists, notably in the anti-metaphysical and epistemological flavor of their beginning points. In Buddhism this characteristic caused it to be described as an empiricism viewed from within and only a metaphysics viewed from without.<sup>20</sup> The status of the metaphysical in Buddhism is therefore dependent upon its having been disclosed upon the path of inner experience rather than by pure speculation if it is to be accepted.<sup>21</sup> As Lama Govinda describes the situation:

Metaphysics is an entirely relative concept, whose boundaries depend upon the respective plane of experience upon the respective form and extent of consciousness. The Buddha overcame metaphysics and its problems, not merely ignoring them, but in an absolutely positive manner, in that through training and the extension of consciousness he pushed back the boundary lines of the latter so that the metaphysical became the empirical.<sup>22</sup>

Van Buren of course does not undertake anything so extensive, but the greater part of his writing has to do with the problems of empiricism and epistemology with the character and limitations of language always in view. Although he

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20. Govinda, op. cit., p. 39

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.



moderates his early rejection of metaphysics, he does not go beyond speaking of metaphysics as "a view of things which is our view"<sup>23</sup> when he does allow it. Ultimately however he does not strive for a complete metaphysics of this sort in his own development, contenting himself with only partial success in attaining "a way of seeing the world, of seeing everything" which he believes would constitute a full metaphysics.<sup>24</sup> What metaphysics he thus sees himself engaged in fully he defines as "the attempt to clarify the foundations of our thought and the fundamentals of our language,"<sup>25</sup> --which seems to have more in common, we again note, with epistemology than metaphysics.

If Van Buren never gets to an affirmative description of the universe and its nature, he thereby shares this situation in common with the Mahayana who at best arrive at a negative metaphysics through the doctrine of śūnyatā but never lose their antipathy to what would be categorised as a true constructive metaphysical system. One cannot discover a metaphysics in a void. The distinction at this point between Van Buren and Mahayana however is apparent in his belief that his failure is a requisite of the limitations of human understanding and Mahayana belief that their "failure" is the requisite of their absolute understanding.

#### Other Similarities

One is inclined to recognise some further very minor similarities with Buddhism in Van Buren's thought. For example his discussion of what he calls a "discernment situation"<sup>26</sup>

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23. Van Buren, Theological Explorations, p. 148

24. Van Buren, The Edges of Language, p. 165

25. Ibid., p. 107

26. Van Buren, The Secular Meaning of the Gospel, p. 153

gives rise to the suspicion that this is but another way of speaking of the sudden flash of insight or illumination not unlike the Buddhist expects from some meditation techniques which they have developed (e.g. Zen satori). Likewise when he speaks of being "struck by the Biblical story" or its contemporary portrayal<sup>27</sup> one has the sense of a special insight derived from contact with certain verbal forms.

This also suggests that the Bible may function like the Dharma to bring its hearer (or reader) to a special insight. Thus Mahayana and Theravada texts concur that "one who sees the Truth sees the Buddha"<sup>28</sup> while Van Buren tells us that we discover the freedom of Jesus for ourselves when "the history of Jesus and of his liberation of his disciples on Easter is a discernment situation."<sup>29</sup> Certainly the Buddhist's intuition also associated liberation with what the Buddha was in terms of the understanding of his truth.

Further, in Van Buren's insistence that Jesus' teaching was that "our human life cannot be put in parentheses as preliminary, tentative, only a dress rehearsal for a later supposedly real performance which is supposed to transcend it"<sup>30</sup> we have an affirmation of the benefits of the religious Christian insight in this lifetime. Such an affirmation matches favorably the Mahayana and Theravada belief that nirvāṇa can be achieved even amid saṃsāra--in the former case through active nirvāṇa and in the latter through the pre-death nirvāṇa of the arahant.

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27. Van Buren, "On Doing Theology," op. cit., p. 59; Theological Explorations, p. 66

28. Ling, Buddhism and the Mythology of Evil, p. 40

29. Van Buren, The Secular Meaning of the Gospel, p. 151

30. Van Buren, Theological Explorations, p. 177

Indeed Van Buren's treatment of the concept of freedom is highly reminiscent of that detached freedom from suffering and desire which the Buddha or Arahant displays. Thus the discernment situation is not only at one and the same time a liberation which happens to the Christian and a new perspective,<sup>31</sup> but it is specifically a liberation exemplified in Jesus. This freedom is a freedom from anxiety, the need to establish one's own identity, and a freedom to exist for others in a "solidarity with men, compassion for them, mercy toward their weakness and wrong."<sup>32</sup> Indeed his death is seen as a measure of this freedom.<sup>33</sup>

It is doubtless easiest to compare such an image of Jesus with the Bodhisattva ideal in Mahayana thought, even though the arahant too strives for egolessness, compassion and mercy. It is easier to see the Bodhisattva's theoretical career as one long life for others. The arahant's personal contribution to the ultimate cessation of all momentary dharmas by the systematic cessation of his own dharma streams by which he thereby provides for such dissolution of suffering as he is able, represents a far less spectacular contribution in some ways.

However, on both counts, Bodhisattvas and arahants are men like Jesus who live devoid of the grasping which egoism produces and in full knowledge of their underlying oneness with the nature and experience of other men. Van Buren only affirms Jesus' humanity, however, insisting that he is nevertheless unique by virtue of the ability of his freedom to make other

31. Van Buren, The Secular Meaning of the Gospel, pp. 169-170

32. Ibid., pp. 123, 151

33. Ibid., p. 151

men free. The Buddhist of course would assign that characteristic to all Buddhas, and be inclined to perceive Jesus insofar as he reflected it, as having attained Buddhahood.

With regard to God, we can note that Van Buren's general reluctance to develop a doctrine of God is a weak parallel to the Buddhist refusal to describe the dharma of nirvāṇa or the void. Insofar as either could be known it would be only through an order of consciousness wholly alien to the mind of humans who are not far advanced toward those psychic attainments Buddhism postulates as possible.

Indeed, since neither nirvāṇa nor śūnyatā can ultimately be described as experiences, Buddhists would even agree with Van Buren's anti-theistic linguistic philosophy which denies "non-verbal experiences,"<sup>34</sup> recognising in doing so that the emphasis for Van Buren is more on the pervasive linguistic character of ordinary human existence than on the possibility of human extension beyond what would strictly come under human experience. The final comment indeed on Van Buren is to point out that his treatment of the problem of the word "God" in all his writings serves only to point us back to the issue of methodology as it has been discussed here.

#### Herbert Braun

Herbert Braun's "unconditional" obligation<sup>35</sup> certainly suggests an order in the world demanding specific responses which is somehow apparent to man. It is certain that this does not require a God, for the Theravada system understands its ethic

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34. Van Buren, The Edges of Language, pp. 66-67

35. Braun, op. cit., p. 215



as the specific outgrowth of the analysis of reality which should be apparent to anyone making a successful analysis. Braun may be referring to such a situation in which one feels unconditionally obligated to fulfill the clearly necessary pattern of existence.

It is unclear in Braun, however, to what extent the scripture is necessary to help man make that analysis, although the implication is: Not necessary but certainly helpful. It appears that men discovered how we must live through understanding of their inter-personal relations and in the scripture then recorded this--albeit in forms now culturally alien. After the fact, therefore, it may be of some use by demonstrating what others have learned, but represents no unique source of knowledge. One is thus strongly reminded of the Theravada view of the achievement of the Buddha and of the nature of the dharma, or the truth.

#### Alistair Kee

Alistair Kee offers us an analysis which attempts to save man from total abandonment to a wholly relative universe. That men must not follow simply any natural ethical rules which evolve from social structures in a godless world is implicit in his ethic of transcendence.<sup>36</sup> Some more awesome authority inhabits man's reality to point out the proper values and draw man into a struggle of overcoming his disabilities and weaknesses.

Kee's vagueness as to the nature of the transcendence he affirms prohibits any clear analysis. Yet he has told us of

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36. Kee, op. cit., pp. 143, 200

the validity he sees in "the infinite qualitative distinction" between time and eternity which means that in some sense (he disallows "supernatural" or "metaphysical") he recognises an absolute functioning within man's world of experience.<sup>37</sup> Likewise he feels that he can still speak in terms of "ultimate concern (for) that which came to expression in Jesus Christ,"<sup>38</sup> and even to call this "coming to expression" an "incarnation."<sup>39</sup>

Also, in insisting that ultimately both ways of life--both that in which Jesus is the measure of all things and that in which man himself is--are natural, Kee avoids some "supernatural" technique for man's proper fulfillment.<sup>40</sup> He admits that the one requires striving (the way of transcendence) while the other is adopted unconsciously and effortlessly. Also he asserts that Jesus makes the other clear but he does so without re-establishing "the old supernaturalistic metaphysics."<sup>41</sup>

Thus it seems that Kee is striving to describe an existence in which the pattern of life into which most men fall, is undesirable and misses certain possibilities which are connected with such a thorough revolution that when those possibilities are grasped the entire pattern of life will change. This conception stands without a personalistic God but somehow rooted in a non-metaphysical transcendent reality which qualifies time by validating the meaning of eternity in some quite unclear manner.

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37. Ibid., p. 202

38. Ibid., p. 195

39. Ibid., p. 212

40. Ibid., p. xxvii

41. Ibid.

Such a development does not exclude a highly abstract and general view of Theravada Buddhism. Theravāda Buddhism also offers no God, but the Buddha is indeed an incarnation of a possibility before all men which when entered into will radically restructure the pattern of their lives and reveal significant meaning in time and existence which is not otherwise readily understood. Indeed, the dharma teaches a way of life which requires man to overcome by wholly natural laws the life which would otherwise and equally naturally occur.

An equation of Jesus and the Buddha would not be allowed by Kee, however, who insists that his faith to remain specifically Christian must see Jesus as "of the utmost significance" rather than as "one of a long line of great historical figures who have pointed beyond themselves to something or someone greater."<sup>42</sup> In terms of our issue, this seems inapplicable for the Buddha did not point to something greater but, having attained enlightenment and nirvāṇa, embodied that "something" which Buddhism is all about--and anyone duplicating his achievement would do the same. Likewise any arahant or highly advanced adept could be recognised as "of the utmost significance" which is such a minimal affirmation in this circumstance that Kee cannot hope to rest his case for Jesus' uniqueness upon it.

Thus Kee's thought remains too provisional and incomplete for a clear development yet in its skeletal form represents a primitive worldview one would expect might well escalate along Buddhist lines. If one takes his belief in the ultimate inability of men to pursue their own ends and correlates it

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42. Ibid.

with the Buddhist teaching of impermanence which ultimately functions to deny men what they desire and crave; and if one takes his "never-failing source of power to pursue quite different ends" and correlates it with the activities which place one irrevocably on the path toward the desireless condition necessary for the attainment of nirvāṇa, one can speak either as he does of "God"<sup>43</sup> or as the Buddhist would, of "Dharma."

It seems that Kee will have to give more substance to his development than he has if he wishes to preserve its uniquely "Christian" form in a manner which would satisfy him. Otherwise it appears that within his formulation it would be as appropriate to offer the Buddhist Dharma as an answer to the question: "What kind of reality is it?" as to offer Kee's "transcendence" and Israel's "God."<sup>44</sup>

#### Summary

In Van Buren, Braun and Kee we have attempts to talk about men's experience in such a way as to avoid theism yet do justice to certain profound aspects of that experience. Whatever the special qualities of life upon which they focus, in this process there is a concession of the need to treat those qualities in the most respectful manner and with the most potent religious materials available. This category of Christian atheism is similar to a highly rationalistic approach to Buddhism which is generally more common in Theravada development than Mahayana. There is a decided avoidance of myth and a comparable absence of a definite metaphysics. Yet there is

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43. Ibid., p. 200

44. Ibid., p. 231



not an absence of some numinous aspect to reality which indicates that what is going on is intended to be an attempted retranslation of the accepted meanings of life and not a devaluation.

## CHAPTER 15: The Sacred World

Thomas J. J. Altizer

## Three Themes

Altizer presents something of a novelty in that he himself relates his thought to other religious traditions and conceives a classification which he calls "Oriental mysticism." Very early he declared that "Buddhism may fairly be regarded as a representative form of Oriental mysticism,"<sup>1</sup> and he has described the structure of it in this way:

The Oriental mystic follows a path leading to a dissolution of consciousness, an inactivity of the self, or a total transformation of a spatial and temporal existence into an infinite and eternal Being. These purer expressions of the mystical way are consummated in the epiphany of a primordial Totality, a Totality that reveals itself as being the underlying reality of a seemingly fallen cosmos, and a Totality that is the original source of the polarities of consciousness and the antinomies of history. Yet it is of crucial importance for our own purpose to note that the way of the Oriental mystic is a way backwards.<sup>2</sup>

In this development several themes emerge which recur in Altizer's thought and which appear critical to his understanding of Buddhism, traditional Christianity, and his own system. The first theme is that of the temporal direction, the second that of the ultimate religious reality and the third that of the status of the profane world.

Beginning with the first we must note from the outset that at the time of writing his first book, Oriental Mysticism and

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1. Altizer, Oriental Mysticism, p. 11

2. Altizer, "Word and History," op. cit., p. 129

Biblical Eschatology, Altizer was caught up in the idea that it was the "reality of history which must be negated and reversed by the Christian faith," but that later he came to understand that it was rather the "religious movement to a primordial God or primordial beginning" which must be negated and reversed.<sup>3</sup> Thus we find him speaking in Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred of a backward path and a forward path to the sacred, of a backward movement and a forward movement. Yet in this new "reversal" Altizer does not mean that the forward movement must replace the backward, an eschatological replace a "return to the 'nontime' of the primordial beginning."<sup>4</sup> Rather he comes to think of the reversal as part of a full dialectical movement in which:

No longer can we dream that the path to the sacred is backwards, nor can we live in the vain hope that the true path is only forwards: The center is everywhere, eternity begins in every now.<sup>5</sup>

The issue is, of course, that neither Theravada nor Mahayana Buddhism shares the Hindu and Christian belief in a time of primordial purity. While saṃsāra is, if one is bound to it, undesirable in some fundamental sense, Buddhists make no statement of its beginning precisely because time can never have the substantiality which Altizer's mode of speaking relies upon. The Buddhist is not involved in "a backward-moving remembrance or re-presentation (anamnesis) of the sacred events of the past or the primordial Beginning."<sup>6</sup>

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3. Altizer, Toward a New Christianity, p. 301

4. Altizer, Mircea Eliade, p. 195

5. Ibid., p. 200

6. Altizer, "Word and History," op. cit., p. 131

In Theravada dharma theory there is no dharma for time and as dharmas are either eternal or momentary they lack in themselves a passage of time. Thus for the Theravada it is not surprising to find that "time is the concept (kāla-paññatti) by which, first and foremost, mental states are distinguished in internal intuition."<sup>7</sup> Likewise in Mahayana thought, time must fall under the device of śūnyatā and yield itself to ultimate emptiness as well. Time can be no more real than any other aspect of saṃsāra/nirvāṇa.

That the unanswerable questions in Buddhism included precisely the question of the world's beginning is a further and final aspect of the timeless characteristic in Buddhism.<sup>8</sup> Likewise through the teaching of the paṭiccasamuppāda Buddhists underline that they neither posit a first beginning nor believe that one can imagine a time when there was no ignorance or craving for existence.<sup>9</sup>

It is impossible to know whether or not, in fact, Altizer has misunderstood this aspect of Buddhism and consistently interpreted it as a religion which represented a backwards movement or carelessly did not distinguish it at this point from traditions where such a movement is present. If it is a misunderstanding it represents a distortion of which his reader would do well to be aware, for it means that whenever Altizer speaks of Oriental or Eastern understanding which refers to sacred reality we must either exclude Buddhism if that reality

7. Aung, op. cit., p. 16

8. Govinda, op. cit., p. 43; Murti, op. cit., p. 344

9. Smart, Doctrine and Argument in Indian Philosophy, pp. 46-47; Nyanatiloka, op. cit., p. 157 (cf. Anguttara Nikaya X:61)



is referred to as "original" or "primordial," or we must exclude these concepts as Altizer's point relates to specifically Buddhist understandings.<sup>10</sup>

The second area of difficulty with Altizer's treatment of Buddhism is in his understanding of what he called in Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology "the religious reality."<sup>11</sup> While he comes to reject this reality, his understanding of it does not change from that early formulation and thus a later but succinct description is usable here:

Whether they speak of Brahman-Atman, Purusha, Nirvāṇa, Śūnyatā, or Tao, the various forms of Oriental mysticism give witness to an eternal and primordial Reality, a passive and quiescent Reality without energy or motion, and a Reality that only truly appears through the disappearance or inactivity of all other reality whatsoever.<sup>12</sup>

Treated technically, Altizer's description here is too general to be adequate for the understanding of either nirvāṇa or śūnyatā.

In Theravada thought the saṃskṛta dharmas are wholly as "real" as the asaṃskṛta dharma of nirvāṇa. The "presence" or "absence" of nirvāṇa is not a possible way of formulating that conception where the dharma of nirvāṇa is eternal, other dharmas are momentary, but all are "real." Surely, likewise, in the living, walking, talking, teaching and meditating form of the Buddha before his death we have the epitomy of the

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10. Re. sections ambiguous in this light: Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, pp. 33-34, 40; Altizer, "America and the Future of Theology," op. cit., pp. 18-19

11. Altizer, Oriental Mysticism, p. 13

12. Altizer, "Word and History," op. cit., p. 129

Theravada concept of nirvāṇa in life. The Buddha's life after enlightenment embodies the pinnacle of human attainment--not the annihilation of such life. That such an attainment would eliminate future suffering as well as present suffering speaks of the positive long-term effects. While Altizer may not be wrong to speak of nirvāṇa as "passive and quiescent" this does not constitute a sufficient description of the Theravada nirvāṇa. What he has given in the above description is a similarity which the concepts he names may share among themselves but which does not make them equivalents.

This is certainly even more true of śūnyatā. As we said, in the Mahayana thought, śūnyatā serves the Bodhisattvas and Buddhas as the principle for their utterly free phenomenalizations and activities, providing the conceptual framework for "active nirvāṇa." Mahayana thought is, if anything, even more resistant to the "passive and quiescent" theme Altizer believes to be so central, than is the Theravada formulation. Again, while such formulations as Altizer engages in are by no means contrary to some Mahayana efforts at conceiving śūnyatā or nirvāṇa, they cannot stand by themselves and do justice to its full function or significance. If Altizer should insist that it is the final, ultimate and most abstract structure of śūnyatā to which he refers it would only be said that such lies far outside the scope of verbal formulations in the realm of prajñā.

Finally, and closely related to the other two, is the issue of the status of present phenomenal existence. Altizer tells us that "the forms of Oriental mysticism . . . must

culminate in an absolute negation of the Given"<sup>13</sup> and that "nirvāṇa is radically detached from all experience and understanding of the world."<sup>14</sup> Likewise he asserts that:

Our initial judgement about Oriental mysticism must be that it is a way of radical world-negation . . . . Oriental mysticism sets itself against the autonomy of that which appears before it, seizing upon the actuality of that which happens to exist or to be at hand as the initial springboard for its own movement of negation. However, this movement of radical negation is inseparable from an interior recovery of a sacred Totality, a primordial Totality embodying in a unified form all those antinomies that have created an alienated and estranged existence.<sup>15</sup>

In these formulations Altizer is attempting to express the radical disjuncture which he conceives between the world in which man finds himself and of which man finds himself, and the religious reality.

The crucial point in this formulation by Altizer is seen in his equation of the Kingdom of God with the Buddhist nirvāṇa. Such a pairing supports the idea that nirvāṇa is someplace to go, a "heaven" which exists as a reward for the successful Buddhist, an alternative environment to saṃsāra even as the Kingdom of God is to the "kosmos" or fallen world in Christianity. Thus, just as the Kingdom of God brings an end "to the present order and structure of the world,"<sup>16</sup> so nirvāṇa would represent the abolition of saṃsāra.

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13. Altizer, "The Sacred and the Profane," op. cit., p. 144

14. Altizer, "Nirvāṇa and the Kingdom of God," *The Journal of Religion*, April, 1963, p. 109

15. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, pp. 33-34

16. Altizer, "Nirvāṇa and the Kingdom of God," op. cit., pp. 108-109

However, nirvāṇa is clearly not a heaven. It is no place and it provides, as we have already noted, no sanctuary from saṃsāra. Rather, for the Mahayana, it is saṃsāra known through prajñā as śūnya and for the Theravada it is a kind of dharma which comes to be substituted for the samsaric dharmas but is also eternally real regardless of the condition of the samsaric dharmas which may reveal it (as in the case of an arahant who is said to have achieved nirvāṇa) but cannot partake of it.

In the Theravada formulation there is a disjuncture of kind between saṃskṛta and asaṃskṛta dharmas but the one does not end and the other begin any more than does nirvāṇa represent a primordial totality to which the Buddhist seeks to return. Indeed, nirvāṇa is of no concern to the individual Buddhist except as a name for the condition of samsaric reality which he attempts to initiate according to the laws by which the saṃskṛta dharmas occur. In this sense it is the natural completion of natural existence--its perfection in terms of the most ideal utilisation of samsaric dharmas.

Certainly there are deep negations within both Mahayana and Theravada formulations, the objects of which are rooted in the world as the Buddhist perceives it--suffering, bondage, ignorance. However, if nirvāṇa is to be equated with the sacred reality of Altizer's concern, he must recognise that it is not so separate from the Buddhist's world as is the Kingdom of God from the Christian's. In Mahayana thought nirvana even is saṃsāra; in Theravada thought nirvāṇa has no significance to man except as a certain samsaric attainment. Always there is that where they do not overlap: Without prajñā the Mahayana cannot know that saṃsāra is nirvāṇa and the Theravada recognise



the irreconcilable difference between *sam̐skṛta* and *asam̐skṛta* dharmas. Yet likewise there is the realisation of *nirvāṇa* within *samsāra*: *Prajñā* and the end of defilements.

#### The Dialectical Method

The difficulty which these three themes reveal must be identified as by no means representing a complete misunderstanding so much as a problematic methodology which Altizer adopted and which remains critical to his thinking throughout all the stages of his development, and consequently, also critical to his understanding of Buddhism and his mode of describing it and relating it to what he wishes to say about Christianity--both traditional and modern radical forms. The basic nature of this methodology Altizer takes from Eliade and he tells us:

I am employing Eliade as a route to a new form of theology . . . . Eliade posits a sacred that is the opposite of the profane; it is this very dialectical opposition of the sacred and profane that makes the sacred meaningful to the profane consciousness.<sup>17</sup>

This is critical to our understanding of Altizer and of his understanding of Buddhism in particular, for Altizer is informing us that the only way in which the critical truths and reality with which he wishes to concern himself can be handled is dialectically, or set in opposing pairs which become the basis for an effort at synthesis achieved through a negation of one and affirmation of the other.

The result of such an approach is pervasive and critical. Opposition becomes essential. Separation is built into the

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17. Altizer, Mircea Eliade, p. 18

system. Altizer's "alienation and estrangement" are inherent in his whole approach, for he consigns himself to begin with them. In Mahayana thought such dialectic is used to undermine man's confidence in the rational mind. In Altizer's thought dialectic helps him understand and respond to, grasp and work with the categories he selects. The sacred is thus known not in relation but in opposition and as Altizer wishes to equate nirvāṇa or śūnyatā with the sacred he must necessarily understand it as the opposite to samsara.

By this methodology, however, Altizer must not only structure concepts into opposing pairs, but must determine which shall be the one which he will then negate, and the one which he will then affirm. While he begins with negating the profane and affirming the sacred, the critical reversal which he undertakes eventually brings him to the affirmation of the profane and the negation of the sacred. All pairs based upon this basic sacred/profane dualism share in this negation and affirmation even as they are made to share in an identity of the nature of contrariness and opposition.

There is, virtually predictably, in such a method, a tendency to view everything as being part of some basic pair of opposites or contraries and eventually to view everything as dividing in some finally complete division. It is such a division as this that Altizer conceives with his sacred and profane pair. Such dualism may sound very Gnostic, but Altizer saves himself from such a judgement by defining Gnosticism as a system which embodies a hatred of both the world and existence

in the world,<sup>18</sup> or in other words as a response to a basic dualism, Gnosticism negates the profane and affirms its opposite, the sacred.

Yet Altizer also knows Gnosticism as artificial<sup>19</sup> for Altizer has no intention of maintaining a dualism and that is the character of dialectical thinking of course, for it provides a technique for rising above dualism. Altizer seems to pose two such techniques. The first is that of religion which involutes, reverses history and annuls antinomies<sup>20</sup> as it returns to the primordial Totality in its backward movement. This is the technique which Altizer first attempted and which he identifies with the negation of the world and the affirmation of the sacred Reality opposed to it.

The other technique for responding to the fundamental oppositions by which he understands existence is that of dialectical thinking. This is itself, as he uses it, the opposite of the religious one, for it affirms the profane and negates the sacred in a movement which carries Altizer not backwards or even forwards but into the present. It is, as such "a radical quest for a new mode of religious understanding"<sup>21</sup> which opposes the old religious understanding.

The difference between the two techniques is therefore in the ability of Altizer's dialectic to find the "ultimate coincidentia oppositorum . . . in the Now" or, in the eternal recurrence where there is no backwards or forward because "the

18. Altizer, "America and the Future of Theology," op. cit., p. 19

19. Altizer, Oriental Mysticism, p. 168

20. Altizer, "The Sacred and the Profane," op. cit., p. 143

21. Altizer, Mircea Eliade, p. 13

center is everywhere, eternity begins in every now."<sup>22</sup> This method embraces and affirms a radically profane nothingness therefore and negates the religious method which would seek and affirm a sacred Totality which does not belong to the present.<sup>23</sup>

Altizer's intent to embrace the profane leads to a curious pattern of affirmations and negations. First and foremost he must negate that sacred reality which stands in opposition to the profane and this he identifies as God, proclaiming a dual doctrine of the death of God and his kenotic/incarnational act through Christ by which the sacred is emptied of its transcendent form and is incarnated in the immanent, "being here and now . . . (drawing) into itself all those powers which were once bestowed upon the Beyond."<sup>24</sup>

This negation of God however means that his old form becomes empty and vacuous as the process empties it into the new form of the new existence, the new humanity, the new here and now, and in the old form of God contemporary man "recognises the spiritual emptiness of our time as the historical actualisation of the self-annihilation of God."<sup>25</sup> Altizer admits "the horror and anguish embedded in such a condition of humanity"<sup>26</sup> as the death of God creates and the loss of the ancient creator/creation cosmology which authenticated our existence and saved us from "the brute realities of history."<sup>27</sup>

22. Ibid., pp. 199-200

23. Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, p. 150

24. Altizer, "Theology and the Death of God," op. cit., p. 93

25. Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, p. 110

26. Ibid.

27. Altizer, "Theology and the Death of God," op. cit., p. 95



There remains only "an autonomous world existing in-itself"<sup>28</sup> but this means that our existence is now "vacuous and rootless,"<sup>29</sup> and that a nothingness "has descended upon man in the wake of his struggle to create a new history and a new reality."<sup>30</sup> Man exists "in a chaos freed of every semblance of cosmological meaning and order."<sup>31</sup> Still to Altizer the dialectic of the death of God and incarnation affirms our "chaos, nothingness and despair"<sup>32</sup>--not rejects it. It is the embodiment "of the total affirmation of meaninglessness and horror."<sup>33</sup>

Such a mood as Altizer herein expresses approaches the intuition of saṃsāra which the Theravada adept might experience as he meditates upon the sheer insubstantiality of the dharmas as the only ultimately real things, and upon his own soullessness in the face of the meaningless order of the procession of the dharma streams eternally recurring in the pattern indicated in the paṭiccasamuppāda. The Mahayana would wholly understand this description too, but submit it then to śūnyatā and negate even the nothingness of saṃsāra by the affirmation that it was as empty as nirvāṇa. Yet the inherent affirmation of saṃsāra would be there in the arahant's attainment of complete mastery of his dharmic reality and the Mahayana adept's perfect understanding of his world through prajñā.

Altizer's dialectic reflects the affirmation of freedom inherent in an analysis of the world's autonomy, however, for

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28. Altizer, "Word and History," op. cit., p. 127

29. Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, p. 110

30. Altizer, Oriental Mysticism, p. 152

31. Altizer, "Theology and the Death of God," op. cit., p. 102

32. Altizer, "America and the Future of Theology," op. cit., p. 17

33. Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, p. 150

he understands that the transcendent God who was an eternal and impassive being "is the power enclosing energy and stilling movement, the power of darkness standing over against and opposing all life and light"--in other words, God is Satan.<sup>34</sup> The true evil is therefore Being, the Other, the transcendent realm which by its absolute superiority could only deprive man of anything he should think was his and could only be an irreconcilable opposite to man and his existence.

To be rid of this evil is to be freed, it is to recognise our chaos as God's tomb and our anguish as the "smell" of his decomposition and this recognition amounts to a liberation from "the uncanny and awesome sense of the mystery and power of our godless reality."<sup>35</sup> With God, man is "enslaved to the alienation of 'being' and to the guilt of 'history'"<sup>36</sup> but without God man is freed from both. As in the case of the Buddhist śūnyatā: Nothingness liberates. Without an external judge and director, reality is freed to follow its own natural paths, to be what it is and to affirm that without challenge or comment from above or without.

But the freedom with which Altizer is concerned is more than an ontological freedom. It is also deeply ethical for it includes freedom "from the alien power of all moral law" which to Altizer is the true meaning of the forgiveness of sin.<sup>37</sup> Likewise it is freedom from a particular past, ecclesiastical confession or even civilisation.<sup>38</sup> The liberation affects man's pattern of living as well as his world-view.

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34. Ibid., p. 97

35. Ibid., p. 96

36. Altizer, "Theology and the Death of God," op. cit., p. 110

37. Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, p. 147

38. Altizer, "America and the Future of Theology," op. cit., p. 18

This freedom is in fact the result of a human autonomy which is the personal counterpart of the autonomy of the world, and as such it too demonstrates "the vacuity of human existence."<sup>39</sup> Thus Altizer can portray the resultant freedom as not only of the texture of moral freedom but of deliverance from selfhood as well.<sup>40</sup> Since awareness of the Wholly Other God had been possible only through "a fallen confinement in an isolated selfhood" with the death of such a God man "ceases to be aware of a distance separating himself from other," and he experiences the abolition of his autonomous solitary ego.<sup>41</sup>

In the final analysis Altizer's affirmed world would seem to have much in common with Mahayana's śūnya saṃsāra affirmed too as nirvāṇa. Altizer has to kill a God before he can identify the sacred with the profane but Mahayana has only to banish that ignorance which suggests that there is a substantial reality of any kind, sacred or profane by Altizer's categorisation.

Ultimately it cannot be forgotten that by his method Altizer seeks to return to man everything which he lost in the negation of the sacred as the opposite of the affirmed profane in a dialectical movement seeking a final coincidencia oppositorum. Thus eternity has become the concrete, present moment;<sup>42</sup> our darkness is really light;<sup>43</sup> even God is most truly God in his incarnate state of alienation from the transcendent form and thus through the death of God "God remains God or the

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39. Altizer, Oriental Mysticism, p. 173

40. Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, p. 128

41. Ibid.

42. Altizer, Mircea Eliade, p. 124

43. Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, p. 152

divine process remains itself."<sup>44</sup> When Altizer declares the new symbol of Eternal Recurrence as a portrait of a new totality of bliss<sup>45</sup> and Yes-saying as "a primary symbol of the higher ways of mysticism always reflecting a final coincidencia oppositorum, a total union of transiency and eternity, of suffering and joy"<sup>46</sup> one feels oneself not far removed from a Buddhist saṃsāra and nirvāṇa which do not lend themselves to an easy polarisation.

It is not unlikely that Altizer cast the whole understanding of religious methods and symbols and concepts in the way in which he did both because its usefulness to the particular Christian difficulties with which he is concerned is apparent in his retelling of the Christian myth, and because it supported his claim to the uniqueness of Christianity. Buddhism then became a religion and religion became that which "must necessarily direct itself against a selfhood, a history, or a cosmos existing immediately and autonomously as its own creation or ground."<sup>47</sup> Clearly in the need to do this Altizer shows that he equated nirvāṇa or śūnyatā with the threat to his existence which he felt in the transcendent creator God or the new creation/primordial totality symbol which in Christianity is represented by the Kingdom of God.

With his dialectic therefore, Altizer believed he had solved the problem of God, creating a form of the Christian myth which he and other secular men might affirm, and establishing

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44. Ibid., p. 88

45. Ibid., p. 153

46. Ibid., p. 150

47. Ibid., p. 34



its superiority over all religions--necessarily hostile to secular man. Thus Altizer says:

The history of religions teaches us that Christianity stands apart from other higher religions of the world on three grounds: (1) its proclamation of the incarnation, (2) its world-reversing form of ethics, and (3) the fact that Christianity is the only one of the world religions to have evolved--or in some sense to have initiated--a radically profane form of Existenz.<sup>48</sup>

This statement can be no more than an argument in the round. Altizer has defined and described Buddhism by his concept of religion and Christianity by his concept of world affirmation. He has set sacred and profane against each other and refused them proximity in Buddhism but asserted a coincidencia oppositorum in Christianity. Indeed, the very problems which haunted Altizer do not exist in Buddhism in the terms he understands and knows yet by creating them for Buddhism he has imposed upon it a form of the dialectic which he rejects.

In fact, Altizer is probably very close to the Buddhist approach to the world which takes it as containing its own deepest truths, yielding an autonomous ethic, and placing its highest values in the fullest uses which can be made by man of the here and now with which he finds himself. Nirvāṇa and śūnyatā support, not challenge this.

William Mallard

With Mallard we are relieved of a development which relies heavily on its contrast with "Oriental mysticism" and "religion" as did Altizer's, yet one otherwise remarkably like his

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48. Altizer, "Theology and the Death of God," op. cit., pp. 110-111

colleague's. Thus Mallard is intent on making the point that "the world and its 'other' (i.e., the absurd actuality of human history, and the fearful divine Abyss) have met in a dynamic coincidence."<sup>49</sup> He too sees this realised "in the literal and anguished death of Jesus" which becomes identical with "the Divine 'death'" in which "the Infinite as the abstract, wrathful Abyss of Deity" vanished.<sup>50</sup>

Thus "two opposite realities are brought into a new kind of unity with one another"<sup>51</sup> and the result is that the sacred is now only the openness of the future and "the tension of human freedom toward its secular future."<sup>52</sup> This provides the basis, as it did for Altizer, for an affirmation of the world, an acceptance of reality and a proper understanding of it. Christianity does not support an alienation of man from his world which can no longer be replaced by a new creation, or from his own being which can no longer be broken up to provide for some eternal soul.

In this discription Mallard speaks of "the creative tension towards the future in successive deaths and rebirths" so that "the kingdom comes and is always coming."<sup>53</sup> This identity of the Kingdom with the always approaching moment is highly suggestive of the identity of saṃsāra with nirvāṇa in Mahayana thought and of the Buddha nature in all men, for it includes the incarnate form of the divine. Likewise there is a realisation that man knows himself as suffering and limited

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49. Mallard, op. cit., p. 328

50. Ibid., p. 335

51. Ibid., pp. 327-328

52. Ibid., pp. 335 and 338

53. Ibid., p. 328

by the ambiguities of his existence but a call nevertheless is made for belief in the fact of a meaningful future<sup>54</sup> which the Buddhist would understand as offered in *prajñā* and its freedom.

### Summary

Both Altizer and Mallard are involved in a way of formulating the Christian myth which does not oppose God's reality to man's in a way which deprives man's of an ultimate validity and God's of a meaningful participation in it. When they speak in terms of the death of God, the incarnation through Jesus, the transformation of transcendence into immanence, they are speaking in clearly Christian vocabulary. When however, they speak of the coincidence of opposites, the unity in man's world of the sacred and the profane, the quality of nothingness and voidness, chaos and man's impermanence, they are speaking in a vocabulary which might serve too to express Buddhist principles and truths.

Finally, we would suggest that while the Theravāda system cannot be fairly portrayed as a simple negation of existence, using as it does *saṃsāra* to terminate itself leaving only *nirvāṇa*, the Altizer-Mallard view is most congenial to the mood of the Mahayana and their resentment of the separation of *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* which does exist in the Theravada system, however qualified it may be.

What sets Altizer and Mallard apart most distinctly is their death of God, Christological incarnation theology suggesting an historical process behind the identity of the opposites

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54. Ibid., p. 339

--their coincidence. This knows no parallel in Buddhism and would seem to reflect a flow of the abstract into the concrete, the sacred reality into the profane. While the flow of compassion may be seen as such a movement from the dharmakāya to the nirmāṇa and sambhogyakāyas, it is not the ultimate direction but only serves the purpose of returning the energy through a growth in enlightenment.

The difficulty in clearly distinguishing the Altizer-Mallard development from the Mahayana is in the nature of its dialectical method which is difficult to end short of some final mystical resolution. This is far more clearly apparent in Altizer than in Mallard. Mallard avoids such a resolution because he is less concerned with a specific function between the transcendent, the human element and the resultant unity in the Kingdom. Altizer however, being at least as concerned with his method as with the dogmatic system which he constructs from it, is caught up in and committed to the system in a manner which Mallard's presentation escapes. Thus one suspects Altizer's final resolution is so mystical that it becomes debatable whether he himself finally affirms the profane by the time his dialectical pendulum has completed its swing to bring the sacred into synthesis with it.



## PART II: ANALYSIS

## B. The Structure of Christian Atheism

## CHAPTER 16: Collapse of the God/World Dualism

## Choosing the World

The one point at which the Christian atheists' voices converge despite all their divergence on other matters is in their rejection of that elusive yet pervasive Christian cosmology which recognises a God apart from and outside a world which for its part is then conceived as dependent upon and obedient to the authority, initiative and sustenance of God. Insofar as they are atheists it is first and foremost in this sense.

Thus Weil offers an understanding of God and the world which sees the world as a complex of aspects of the dynamic movement within the Godhead. Bonhoeffer insists that man must live without God and Vahanian follows with a description of our culture as doing just that. Sölle echoes this in pointing out that the transcendent God is a victim of the loss of the Absolute by our culture. Hamilton, Altizer and Mallard replace the otherness of God with a special interpretation of the world. Van Buren, Braun and Kee turn from God as a name for something transcendent to man's world, to God as a name for some aspect of man's own existence.

What is clearly challenged here is that structure of traditional Christianity which Joseph Campbell called "mythic dissociation" in which "the sense of the sacred is still officially dissociated from this earth and its life."<sup>1</sup> It is

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1. Campbell, "The Secularisation of the Sacred," The World Year Book of Religion, Vol. I, Cutler (editor), p. 633

further, a specific concept of the sacred which places the world and men in a demeaning condition and position with regard to the sacred which is specifically problematic. Insofar as the Christian atheists continue to speak of God or in any way reflect some qualification upon some popular conception of what atheism is, this point may appear obscure, yet it underlies the broader development undertaken by each and thus becomes of primary significance.

That there is confusion on this point cannot be denied. In the responses to a "Death of God" theology which appeared in a sudden outburst of publication in the 1960's, the problem was identified differently. Some said that it was Nietzsche's God who was dead, others that it was the idea of a supernaturalist God, or a concept of God created in the seventeenth century, or the God of metaphysics and morality, the God of everyday "good churchgoing people" whom the theologians no longer believe in, and so on.<sup>2</sup> Even among the Christian atheists there is a broader base of attack apparent than simply that against traditional theism, as for example, Vahanian's rejection of the cultic concept of God still held by Christian religiosity which has lost its cultural base, Kee's antipathy toward specifically a personal supernatural being, or Weil's attack on a God known by his providence and consolation.

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2. cf. Comstock, "Theology After the 'Death of God,'" The Meaning of the Death of God, Murchland (editor), p. 216; DeDeugd, "Old Wine in New Bottles?" Talk About God, p. 135; MacIntyre and Ricoeur, The Religious Significance of Atheism including MacIntyre's "The Debate About God" (esp. p. 14) and Ricoeur's "Religion, Atheism and Faith" (esp. p. 66); Novak, "The Christian and the Atheist," The Meaning of The Death of God, Murchland (editor), p. 72

At the center, however, is this inability to work with a traditional theology which was essentially dualistic, and an acceptance and affirmation of the ultimate adequacy of the world in and of itself for any eventuality which may befall it. Man's realm comes to take on a new kind of autonomy and sufficiency which casts man and his situation in a new light and can no longer locate the God beyond. Thus when Anthony Flew referred to the Stratonician presumption that "the principles of the world lie inside the world"<sup>3</sup> he was summarising the case which the Christian atheists take to be true. It is not just that the world is not deficient in reality or inferior in value but that the world is the only reality or value so far as man is concerned.<sup>4</sup>

Weil, Vahanian and Sölle represent important variations on this theme and require some comment in line with the qualification "so far as man is concerned." For these three, man reads in himself and his situation of something which provides a decisive indeterminacy. Thus time and space measure the infinity between God and Christ in Weil's vision but those two poles reflect an absolute aspect which is difficult to correlate with that aspect of the world. Also her formulation of an illusory selfhood and imaginary world must be carefully understood within the context of the true world of creation/decreation as an aspect of the divine life.

In Vahanian there is the infinite which the finite cannot comprehend but which requires the wholly finite state of

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3. Flew, *op. cit.*, pp. 69 and 194

4. cf. Ogden, *op. cit.*, p. 34

iconoclasm or methodological atheism. In Sölle there is that which Christ is the representative of and the identity of which is not yet available. The theme in all three is one of man and his reality as complete so far as man's doing precisely what as man he should do. The world provides all that man needs and all that he needs to know as well as the way to be what he needs to be whether it is empty, iconoclastic or represented. What numinous emptiness, infinity or representation there is beyond that is to man as man, non-utilitarian, even as is the dharma of nirvāṇa to samsaric man in Theravada thought.

The strong similarities between Weil's thought and the Mahayana system are important here, for both do engage in a strange kind of world affirmation which utilises no other reality than that available to man. Thus, both the world and man as of one nature with it are held up for man's deepest consideration and analysis which they are confident will reveal the empty, unreality of everything which that world and man appears to the unanalytical mind to be. The resultant negation gives the world its highest value however and thus Weil can see it as an aspect of the flow of God's love even as the Mahayana can see it as a manifestation of karuṇā. Man is therefore offered a world which is nothing but it is precisely a nothing which is invaluable and the only thing which man is and has. In this surely curious way Weil and Mahayana can be said to be affirming the world as its own totality: Nirvāṇa is saṃsāra and God is the world; all is śūnyatā and nothing is real--except as the real nothing.

The world which is affirmed as its own totality by Vahanian and Sölle is a world which is affirmed in a manner



analogous to the affirmation made by the Theravada of *samsāra*. Nirvāṇa is not the realm of man, nor is the transcendent God for whom provision is made by a methodological atheism, cultural iconoclasm, or representation as immanent and thus weak and suffering--or, put otherwise, of the stuff of which man himself is. Therefore man must find his meaning and direction himself within a world which readily reveals under his insistent efforts the deepest truths of its nature. Among these is a central truth which Vahanian knows as faithfulness to the inconceivable, Sölle as acceptance of Christ's status as a representative, and Theravada as the cessation of defilements and the end of grasping.

For the others there is not the same complexity and subtlety in this matter of non-dualism as a contrast to theistic dualism. They fall into two categories: That with Bonhoeffer, Hamilton, Altizer and Mallard who insist that the old transcendence is now somehow unified with man's world; and that with Van Buren, Braun and Kee who seek to show that the old transcendence always was but part of man's existence wrongly projected out of man's world as the God of theism.

#### The Designation "Secular"

Martin E. Marty in his study of modern secularity cited and accepted an Oxford English Dictionary definition of "secular" as:

Belonging to the world and its affairs as distinguished from the church and religion . . . chiefly used as a negative term, with the meaning non-ecclesiastical, non-religious or non-sacred; of or belonging to the present

or visible world as distinguished  
from the eternal or spiritual world;  
temporal, worldly. <sup>5</sup>

Such a definition is not wholly appropriate to much modern use of the word however. Where the Christian atheists are concerned secularity is better defined as the practice of relating everything to this world.<sup>6</sup> It is true that they are not uniform in their understanding of how this is so but they are uniform in seeking the essential rightness of this situation for man.

The broader, non-dialectical understanding of secularity allows us to speak of Weil, Vahanian and Sölle as secularists although they are more problematic in this area than the others because of the broader implications of a transcendent aspect of the structure of their world. They would not, however, divide their world into two spheres--the sacred and the profane, the religious and the secular. Even granting that these three are less ambivalent about religion and not at all hostile to what each understands as good religion, they oppose a religion of two life spheres in one cultural world and here align themselves with the more dominant secularity of the others.

Such a treatment of the concept of the secular finds support outside religious atheism as well, as in William Lynch's suggestion that secularity be regarded as the "march of mankind, in the autonomous light of its own resources toward the mastery and humanisation of the world"<sup>7</sup>--a concept which brings him within sight of Bonhoeffer and the predominant tone of the

5. Marty, The Modern Schism, p. 9

6. cf. Comstock, op. cit., p. 236

7. Lynch, Christ and Prometheus, p. 7

Christian atheists. Weil must be distinguished from this ideal as well as the Buddhists insofar as the use which she and they make of the world and the manner in which she and they affirm it is not directly related to a drive for "the mastery and humanisation" of the world in the sense of modern social engineering so much as in the sense of what might be called "spiritual engineering." On the other hand, insofar as Lynch and the other Christian atheists intend something far deeper and more radical than is usually understood on the level of the social sciences, they must be seen as approximating to Weil's and the Buddhists' view.

At any rate "secular" is an appropriate designation for the Christian atheists' system in terms of its centeredness in this world--a definition which is, as we have said, broad and non-dialectical. Such secularity might be pinpointed in three themes: Innocence, responsibility and solitude.

Innocence is seen in the Christian atheists rejection of the vision of the world as fallen and dependent upon God for any validity to which it might return. Even Vahanian who attributed to man a tendency toward idolatry and mere religiosity shows no desire to place upon man the burden of some metaphysical guilt such as that which Helmut Thielicke described as a guilt in the very source of man's being.<sup>8</sup> Rather Vahanian sees the traditional Christian avoiding this extreme by formulating an "ethic of forgiveness," now replaced by secular man's "ethic of innocence,"<sup>9</sup> for which Vahanian has no

8. Thielicke, Nihilism, p. 49

9. Vahanian, The Death of God, p. 185

harsh words. Even Lynch recognised the close connection between innocence and secularity when he pointed out that "the secular project always moves toward some approximation to innocence."<sup>10</sup>

The whole theme of redemption in traditional Christianity is of course challenged by this, even fatally undermined. Indeed, the move to identify God's own identification of himself with the world and human existence which we find in various degrees of advance and fullness in Bonhoeffer, Hamilton, Altizer and Mallard is an alternative to the belief that the world is morally as well as ontologically in debt to God. In fact precisely one aspect of the God/world dualism which became intolerable was this aspect of man's guilt and the subsequent denial which tended to follow from that guilt of any independent worth of man's existence.

The theme of innocence is closely aligned as well with that of responsibility. As Jean Lacroix said of atheism, it takes responsibility and refuses guilt.<sup>11</sup> Likewise Erich Heller in writing about Nietzsche emphasises the theme of responsibility and the fact that atheistic man takes everything upon himself.<sup>12</sup> Vahanian too took the ethic of innocence seriously because responsibility was as essential a cornerstone to it as to the Christian ethic of forgiveness, and "if anything it does not propose to be easier than the Christian ethic."<sup>13</sup>

This matter of innocence and responsibility possesses quite different qualities in Buddhism than in Christianity so that

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10. Lynch, op. cit., p. 104

11. Lacroix, The Meaning of Modern Atheism, p. 46

12. Heller, "The Modern German Mind," Toward a New Christianity, Altizer (editor), p. 100

13. Vahanian, The Death of God, p. 185



the comparison is a complicated one. Both the Mahayana emphasis on *prajñā* (insight) and the Theravada emphasis on ignorance (as the first of the *paṭiccasamuppāda*, for example) would argue for the identification of wrong understanding or lack of understanding as the key to the Buddhist's problem. Sin is a word of questionable validity in the Buddhist system except perhaps as Obeyesekere uses it "to refer to the violation of religious ethics."<sup>14</sup> Even so, as such it would reveal the more fundamental ignorance or lack of insight.

When man discards guilt and assumes responsibility for himself he also assumes a new solitude. At first sight the universe must seem a far more friendly place if there is a sovereign power at work in it for the welfare of its living creatures. Yet it is precisely this consolation of God, this divine assistance which we find the Christian atheists rejecting, as in Weil's opposition to religion as a source of consolation and Bonhoeffer's violent rejection of a *Deus ex machina*, a God used as a stopgap.

There is a preference for what Marghanita Laski described as an uncomplaining solitary endurance which comes with atheism.<sup>15</sup> Inherent in the innocence, responsibility and solitude of the atheists' position is, in fact, a revision of man's self-understanding.<sup>16</sup> While atheism might appear, from the point of view of those who find themselves living with divine assistance, to put itself at a disadvantage, the

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14. Obeyesekere, op. cit., p. 12

15. Bloom, *God and Man*, pp. 29-30 (quoted from a discussion between Archbishop Bloom and Marghanita Laski published here)

16. Reid, op. cit., p. 66

Christian atheists come to experience the opposite as true. It is men who do not expect help and who take responsibility for the totality of their life who are closest to that which it is important for men to attain.

There is, however, more going on in this new understanding than just the character-building qualities to which Laski referred. Thus as Lehmann saw, "the more acutely the 'death of God' is experienced the more threatening does the question of his presence become."<sup>17</sup> The other side of man's solitude is therefore his freedom and independence. The man who accepts the help of the God of theism also finds himself subject to that God and crushed by his ontological magnitude and priority which can only diminish man's sense of himself in his own eyes. Man's solitude is therefore two sided. It reveals the horror of a transcendent God which in the Christian atheists reaches its peak in Altizer's identification of God with Satan (following Blake), and Weil's reversion to the pattern of emptiness and unreality--an equally radical response in a quite different form. It is also however the proof of man's freedom as Altizer and Mahayana realised.

The Christian atheists take this so seriously that they are prepared to affirm even their own mortality for the freedom of being responsible for themselves in the world. In fact, the death of God and the mortality of man are inextricably intertwined as Dunne emphasised when he compared the contemporary theology of the death of God with the old universal myths of

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17. Lehmann, "Some Ideas on Pastoral Theology," Concilium: Atheism and Indifference, March, 1967, p. 44

the death of the gods which reflected that truth about man.<sup>18</sup> Curiously the only point at which Weil sees the freedom inherent in man's atheistic reality is when she affirms that the only free act--truly ultimately free--which she believes man makes is that of negating his own self, or accepting his own unreality in the end.

#### Salvation in the World

The result of this move is that just as redemption does not fit with innocence and responsibility, salvation from finitude and its evil does not fit with solitude. Thus there is no true personal salvation in the orthodox Christian sense in Christian atheism. Altizer does attempt to give man eternity with his dialectic but it is given to man in the form of "The Great Humanity Divine" and not to individuals. Also Mallard may speak of confidence in a meaningful future and Sölle of a time when representation will come to an end, but both know that the fact of death must also be affirmed, Sölle because it is the dead that Christ must represent to God and Mallard because it is a crucial factor of the existence which became affirmable with God's incarnation into it.

Yet salvation continues to be a useful word to the discussion of Christian atheism although its meanings must be carefully identified. Thus if salvation is taken to be the attainment of the fullest possibilities of human existence as it is prior to death, the Buddhist can name the attainment of nirvāṇa by the arahant during his lifetime or the condition of the Bodhisattva after he has attained prajñā, as salvation.

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18. Dunne, "The Myth of God's Death," The Meaning of the Death of God, Murchland (editor), p. 167

Likewise the Christian atheist would recognise full human life without guilt or an isolating egoism as salvific in contrast to the guilt and alienation of the Christian man in a fallen world before a perfect and omnipotent God. Such a use of salvation changes its context from the after-life to the now and as such is recognised as one of the important aspects of secularisation.<sup>19</sup>

There can be no place for a resurrection of the body, a translation into a heaven--an ideal world--or a new creation which rises from the ashes of the destruction of this one in an apocalyptic cataclism. The only hints of ideality in the future are rooted in the principles of this world and involve the possibility of process and evolution. Thus for the Christian atheists, as Bonhoeffer so explicitly insisted, there can be no salvation in the traditional Christian sense. A secular Christianity is nonsoteriological and nonredemptive by the traditional meanings.<sup>20</sup>

However, if one wished to speak of salvation as the attainment of a certain state within this world, as do the Buddhists and as is implicit in certain Christian atheist themes, it would be appropriate to speak of self-salvation not unlike that in Hegelian thought as noted by J. N. Findlay in an article which caught Altizer's attention.<sup>21</sup> If salvation finds any meaning at all in Christian atheism it is in the context of intrinsic forces. The Mahayana could see this as the Buddha

19. Marty, op. cit., p. 104

20. Kaufman, Maynard; "Post-Christian Aspects of the Radical Theology," Toward a New Christianity, Altizer (editor), p. 349

21. Findlay, "Hegel's Study of the Religious Consciousness," Toward a New Christianity, Altizer (editor), p. 55



nature in all men, and the Theravada as the potential all men possess to naturally direct their dharmic streams into that condition where nirvāṇa is realised.

Even when we move closer to the boundaries of atheism and theism as with Vahanian and Sölle, this can be seen in Vahanian's belief that the culture can formulate an iconoclastic will, rightly reading the Word in the world; and in Sölle's resting with man the crucial decision of whether to accept Christ as representative or not--a decision so crucial that Christ and God himself are at risk in it.<sup>22</sup> As an influence from beyond the world, representation can have no reality and is finally and ultimately the result of the world's own nature, its own choices, its own directedness.

Likewise we see self-salvation in Weil's insistence that it is left to man to negate his own self along with the ability to do so. Those who take Jesus as a model for the path of such self-improvement and self-perfection such as Hamilton, Van Buren and Kee follow in the steps of the Theravada Buddhists who look to the Buddha not as a saviour but certainly as a model from which much can be learned and which will prove of much assistance.

Strictly speaking for Altizer and Mallard Christ's death becomes soteriological because it ended the validity of the traditional Christian view that God was remote, holy and creator. Once the incarnation had occurred however, it would no longer be meaningful to speak in such a manner nor even to remember it. Man now one with God's incarnate reality must

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22. Sölle, op. cit., p. 123

settle to the totality of his world. Finally, insofar as God is most truly himself in his alienation from transcendence, as Altizer says, it was the previous situation which was contingent and preliminary, embodying the fullness and finality of this present situation.

In this discussion we can also note that while nirvāṇa as a pre-death reality is a state of self-salvation within human existence, the Theravada's dharma of nirvāṇa as a transpersonal reality in the ultimate sense is a state with which comparison to Christian atheism here appears impossible. Also in Weil's case we do not have any thoroughly metaphysical expression of her thinking about that point on the time-space spectrum which a man is in the context of human death. A projection of her development could take the line that death is finally nothing but part of the illusion of the world as is man and thus the point itself is an eternal and impersonal one. This would be roughly parallel to the thought in Mahayana about impersonal phenomena but because of the "point" aspect not a close equivalent.

Thus Buddhist salvation does not carry the individual beyond death. Even active nirvāṇa must be understood as the phenomenalisation of the Dharmakāya in saṃsāra and not the work of individual beings in the sense that saṃsāric beings are individual. More clearly the nirvāṇa of the post-death state of the arahant preserves nothing of that man who had realised it before his death for he disappeared with the breakup and cessation of the dharmic streams comprising him.

Buddhism and Christian atheism are therefore alike in the rejection of a salvation which will take man from a conditional

environment and place him as himself in an unconditional reality. There is no life after death such as traditional Christianity promised its followers and no heaven in which men will enjoy a perfect yet nevertheless personal and individual existence. Instead the prize to be won by the individual is one comprised of the stuff of this present existence whatever the ambiguities and conditionality which necessarily follow, or whatever loss of selfhood may be incurred.

### Religion

Given that the Christian atheists tend to identify religion with a God/world dualism and secular/religious split as well as with the promise of help in determining and attaining the end toward which man must work with eternal life offered as a reward, it is small wonder that most of them reject religion as having any place within the life of the Christian atheist. This, to most of them, is religion.

Yet we must agree with William Fennell who insisted that "the death of God does not necessarily have as its consequence the demise of religion."<sup>23</sup> Buddhism is offered among other things as an indication that theism and religion are no more inherently related in a manner which would not permit the one without the other than is religion and the kind of childish dependency which seeks a God to get men out of difficulty and explain the mysteries in his existence.

Much of the rethinking about religion may be useful to Christian atheism on further reflection. Richard R. Niebuhr, for example, has offered a definition of religion as that by

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23. Fennell, op. cit., p. 154

which we "present an image in ourselves of what we believe to be the conduct the world/age itself exhibits," or put otherwise as "the name of the human condition of being affected in the totality of our being by the multiplicity of energies and casualties that make up our environment."<sup>24</sup> Such a definition would cohere with the ideal which Altizer, for example, holds up.

Certainly Samuel Miller's assertion that "the function of religion is to fulfill the possibilities of the world" would agree with both Buddhist and Christian atheist activities and values.<sup>25</sup> Nor is either fulfilling the possibility of this world so that they might receive as a reward some other world. This does not deny the belief that there is something out ahead of man which is to be struggled for, however, and Steeman may be right even atheistically when he suggests that religious life begins with existential dissatisfaction.<sup>26</sup> Buddhism and Christian atheism both represent a move toward fuller understanding and improved human existence and thus by this view too may be regarded as religious.

While the Christian atheists are not of one voice over the matter of rites and rituals a possibility of the continuation of these aspects of religion must remain. Indeed Weil, Sölle and Mallard specifically would seem to defend their worth. Hamilton, Bonhoeffer and Kee, for example, represent instead an ambivalence or rejection with regard to such activity. Within

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24. Kaufman, Gordon; "Theological Historicism as an Experiment in Thought," Frontline Theology, Peerman (editor), p. 145

25. Miller, Samuel; op. cit., p. 72

26. Steeman, op. cit., p. 72



itself Buddhism shows a spread from highly abstract and rationalistic philosophy to a highly mythological and symbolic system which provides an ordinary folk worship.<sup>27</sup> When even an atheist such as Laski suggests that atheism needs religion's rites, rituals and words,<sup>28</sup> it seems safe to suggest that Christian atheism itself may clarify and modify its partial hostility to religion in a generalised sense.

Indeed, the alienation from a deliberate religiousness within the system of some of the Christian atheists is almost solely the result of their acceptance of the assumption that the secular/religious split is valid and that a choice must be made as to which of these will be affirmed and which denied. If they refuse to understand religion as making true secularity impossible and regard it rather as a collection of rather varied tools which one might choose to use in the secular project the possibility of very elaborate religious structures might yet evolve in the most secular of the Christian atheists. Mallard's statement that the Church's worship "should always concretely dramatise her secular existence, in which the issues of faith are realised"<sup>29</sup> hints at what might be expected along these lines.

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27. Smart, "The Relation Between Christianity and the Other Great Religions," Soundings, Vidler (editor), p. 112

28. Bloom, op. cit., pp. 29-30 (quoted from a discussion published here between Bloom and Laski).

29. Mallard, op. cit., p. 340

## CHAPTER 17: Atheistic Theology

## Personal and Free

We have already suggested that the Christian atheists are religious whether they would appreciate that designation or not if for no other reason than the habitual use which they make of Christian vocabulary and symbols in a process of seeking self-understanding and world meaning. Further, most of them regarded themselves as theologians doing theology--as among the most recent of the great tradition of theologians stretching back in time behind them. Nor is it to be forgotten that they are popularly regarded as theologians,<sup>1</sup> with the exception of Weil who would be more likely to be described as a modern Christian mystic, or as Susan Taubes put it, as a "French philosopher--mystic--saint."<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless it is clear that their theology is radical and that they are engaged in that activity which Marty describes as changing the substance or altering the meaning of symbols while retaining a certain continuity in the symbols themselves.<sup>3</sup> Likewise much of their work might be regarded as using religious formulas "for purposes other than of expressing the theological statements for which they were originally framed."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, there are times when it must be wondered if they have not strayed from theology to something some claim to be quite different--such as a "community development of doctrines" or

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1. e.g. The Christian Century's series "for younger theologians" published in the mid-1960's to which Van Buren, Altizer and Hamilton contributed. This series was reprinted in 1967 in the book Frontline Theology edited by Dean Peerman.
  2. Taubes, Susan; "The Absent God," op. cit., p. 107
  3. Marty, op. cit., pp. 100-101
  4. McIntyre, "The Debate about God," op. cit., p. 22

religious philosophy defined as the development of personal religious convictions.<sup>5</sup>

Certainly one of the aspects of the thought of the Christian atheists is its highly personal character. This is so much the case that Ogletree believes it has abrogated theology's responsibility to and for the faith as a transpersonal ideal,<sup>6</sup> and Robert McAfee Brown is led to respond to it with the insistence that autobiography has little to do with theology. The latter admits that the theologians who write of the death of God may be accurate in describing their own experience and even the temper of modern man, "but that they say very much about the reality or unreality of God seems questionable" he tells us.<sup>7</sup> The suggestion is clearly that the Christian atheists are too personal to be theological.

The principle inherent in this criticism is a procedural one and is even more clearly pointed out in response to a statement like the following one of John Montgomery:

The final and best evidence of God's existence lies in his Word--in the triple sense of Christ, the gospel he proclaimed and the scripture that infallibly conveys it. The historicity of the Resurrection, the facticity of the Biblical miracles, the internal consistency of Holy Writ and its freedom from empirical error: These must be sustained, or the God of scripture will face away into a misty transcendence for us too, and eventually disappear.<sup>8</sup>

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5. Christian, Oppositions of Religious Doctrines, p. 9
  6. Ogletree, op. cit., p. 34
  7. Brown, "A Campaign on Many Fronts," Frontline Theology, Peerman (editor), pp. 160-161
  8. Montgomery, "A Philosophical-Theological Critique of the Death of God Movement," The Meaning of the Death of God, Murchland (editor), p. 55

It is precisely in such an argument that belief in God depends upon belief in certain dogmas, that the Christian atheist would not be caught. Those dogmas which have lost their grounding in the modern worldview and modes of thought must not be sustained simply to preserve an otherwise and in this sense admittedly unbelievable theism. The Christian atheist is not intent upon the mere preservation of a body of dogma which will utterly collapse if exposed to the rational and empirical or simply experiential view of modern man.

However this does not mean, as Ogletree seems to think, that the Christian atheists seek nothing more "than simply an attempt to find a private and personally satisfying viewpoint in life."<sup>9</sup> While it is apparent that they cannot accept a theology which is not such, it is equally clear that they hope their efforts will speak to and for more Christians than just themselves. Indeed insofar as they assume or believe that responsible theology is a living, changing reality highly sensitive to the excentricities of individuals, cultures and ages they would argue that only a highly personal development tested by each man's own standards can hope to be responsible to a living, personally real tradition.

In theology as the Christian atheists engage in it the guiding question is therefore more "what can or do I affirm?" than "what should I affirm?" If this requires safeguards and correctives they will be found through rigorous attention to analyses of man and his world in which the Word is written. Past tradition is clearly part of that which is to be analysed

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9. Ogletree, op. cit., p. 34



but it holds no sacrosanct position. Ultimately if a priority is to be observed among the competing principles of evaluation and correlation of theological statements it would have to be in a priority of experience to reason, as Van Harvey expressed it.<sup>10</sup>

While Mehta spoke of modern theologians expressing a need for more extended training in philosophy and better reasoning powers<sup>11</sup> and Van Buren was concerned with the logical difficulties of theism, the primary concern among the Christian atheists is much more subjective and empirical. They are neither highly logical by any single logical system nor unduly impressed by the demands and complaints of those who are. Fundamentally Christian atheism is a response to the personal experience of Christian symbols and not a logical development of dogma.

In this process of responding to what they themselves find they can believe and to the manner in which they do believe the truths they verbalise, the Christian atheists, almost to a man, tend to project their experience upon the whole of Western society. They are therefore rather dogmatic in their claim to speak for the vast bulk of modern men with their atheism and secularity and in their assumption that they possess "a corner on the contemporary 'mood' or 'style.'"<sup>12</sup>

Thus when someone like Van Buren speaks of the need to meet the secular man within Christianity to say nothing of those without, he seems to be arguing that theology must reflect the

10. Harvey, "The Nature and Function of Faith," Frontline Theology, Peerman (editor), p. 127

11. Mehta, op. cit., p. 97

12. Hamilton, Kenneth; "The Essentiality of Tradition," Frontline Theology, Peerman (editor), p. 88

intellectual configuration of the age. A Jewish commentator, Eugene Borowitz, has suggested that this is a fundamental issue and some effort should be made to determine whether or not the secular mood is fundamental or superficial, permanent or ephemeral before religion is asked to undergo a major reconstruction for alignment with it.<sup>13</sup>

Ultimately however, if the Christian atheist does attempt to reflect honestly the depths of his own experience and situation in regard to the articles of the Christian faith, it does not seem that the issue of how widespread experiences and situations of that kind are, will really be so significant. The Buddhist for example would readily agree that most men do not recognise the truth about their world but that nevertheless that truth has still been read from their own personal insight, analysis and experience with regard to the world.

While there seems to be concern that they have broad popular backing, this aspect of Christian atheism may be largely a reflex of the natural insecurity of such novel developments as those in which they are engaged. While Van Buren champions a widespread secularity he is also the one who speaks at times for the pluralism of our age in a manner congenial to Borowitz's own description of "the swirling flow of modern thought" in which Christian atheism is "only one current, perhaps even a minor one."<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, there is every indication both that one of their strengths is the highly personal development

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13. Borowitz, "God-is-Dead Theology," The Meaning of the Death of God, Murchland (editor), p. 99

14. Ibid.; cf. Van Buren, Theological Explorations, pp. 38-42

emphasising honesty to one's modernity and also that they are in fact only one among many modern approaches to Christianity with an uncertain but possibly sizeable amount of support.

Along with their highly biographical and personal mode of doing theology, the Christian atheists must be recognised as offering a highly fragmentary theology. Bonhoeffer, for example, so central to the development which followed after him, belongs here only because of the suggestions in a small group of letters which Karl Barth is reported to have considered too inadequately developed to merit close and advanced theological consideration.<sup>15</sup> Ogletree found fault with Hamilton precisely because of the fragmentary nature of his thinking.<sup>16</sup> Weil's vision must be pieced together from the scattered entries in a few cluttered diaries and letters. Van Buren, with three books, admits openly to his technique of exploratory and experimental theology where a position may be abandoned almost as soon as it is expressed.<sup>17</sup> Precisely because of the consistently fragmentary nature of Christian atheism no apology is felt necessary for the inclusion of Braun's and Mallard's thought on the basis of, in each case, one published article.

The reverse side of this fragmentary pattern is the lack of a truly systematic statement of Christian atheism. When mention is made of the system of a Christian atheist it is only such as can be extracted from the materials available, usually only with the greatest difficulty. Even then, in a single man's work there may be the basis of more than one system--as

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15. Mehta, op. cit., pp. 164-165

16. Ogletree, op. cit., p. 27

17. Van Buren, Theological Explorations, p. 3

we see in Hamilton, the two cycles of Weil's atheism, or Van Buren's explorations.

Nor can Christian atheism be said to have been formulated in only one format such as the mystical, the logical or the mythical. The linguistic, logical and empirical concerns of Van Buren could scarcely be more different from the emotive, highly mythological style of Altizer or the mystical via negativa of Weil. In this sense the theme of Christian atheism shows a breadth and diversity strongly reminiscent of an even greater diversity in Buddhism which has been given form as everything from a religion of faith and the supernatural to a philosophy undertaking the greatest imaginable extremes of abstraction and logic.

#### The Complexity of Dialectics

One can identify, however, a prevalence of dialectical modes of thought which seem to rise from the deepest levels of its structure. Both Weil and Altizer, for example, speak of opposites and their possible coincidence. Hamilton speaks of the victory of God's absence over his presence as the breakdown of the dialectic between them.<sup>18</sup> Also of course, the basic God/world and secular/religious pairs which are deeply ingrained in the thought of the Christian atheists as we have already shown, are part of this dialectical mode of thought.

Altizer told us specifically that following Eliade he attempted deliberately to do theology dialectically, and he also speaks of the importance of Jacob Taube's thought to his generation, especially as Taubes discussed the nature of a

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18. Hamilton, "The New Optimism," op. cit., p. 168



dialectical theology in an article which Altizer includes in his book of readings in the Death of God theology.<sup>19</sup> In fact, Taubes identifies dialectical theology as testifying to "the eclipse of the divine in our present situation."<sup>20</sup> Comstock too identifies a fundamental relation between dialectic and atheism. He posits as one of the three sources of the Nietzschean image of the dead God, Durkheim's and Eliade's "primitive distinctions made in all cultures between the sacred and profane, between the holy and secular, between numinous reality and mundane phenomena" which are "the very heart of religion."<sup>21</sup>

While the dialectical tendency to begin with an initial identification of opposites therefore is natural to Christian atheism, so also is the subsequent attempt to rise above or build on such dualism in such a way that a new or higher level is attained which is not subject to the same oppositions. Thus God and the world are separate and opposed categories but it is the world which is affirmed and God who must be rediscovered as the world gives him meaning--a development which reverses the orthodox affirmation of a God giving meaning to the world. We note this radical pattern even in Weil who affirms the world as empty and then identifies it as such with the divine emptiness.

Christian atheism takes so seriously its antipathy to the old orthodox pattern of dialectical development that it cannot

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19. Taubes, Jacob; "On the Nature of the Theological Method," Toward a New Christianity, Altizer (editor), pp. 221-237 (cf. especially p. 236). Altizer's comments: p. 219

20. Ibid., pp. 236-237

21. Comstock, op. cit., p. 217

embody Lynch's definition of dialectic "as meaning the positive interplay of contraries."<sup>22</sup> Rather in Christian atheism there is an effort toward a quite radical eventual obliteration of the dialectical situation. Somewhat paradoxically therefore the dialectical mode arouses a pattern of deep dissatisfaction and of search for some ultimate and permanent mastery of or victory over its form.

The Christian atheists therefore seek a unity such as the world, or a coincidence such as one of the sacred and profane, or a resolution through dominance as when absence replaces presence. They thus do not continue dialectically--playing with opposites--but represent instead a mode of seeking a way out of opposition. It is felt that there is strength in a position which can formulate a divine impotence at one with the world so that power must be redefined as no longer the opposite of weakness just as divinity is no longer the opposite of humanity, and transcendence no longer the opposite of immanence.

Accordingly, one can find in the thought of the Christian atheists modes of mystical unity and non-dialectical relativity as well. With these the divisions of dialectic's initial oppositional patterns are re-formed into patterns not themselves dialectical. This may reflect what David Miller suggests is the emergence of a kind of "modern spirituality resembling preneolithic spiritualities in which orthodox Western distinctions between masculine and feminine, aquiline and serpentine, olympian and chthonic, solar and lunar, heroic and demonic are confused."<sup>23</sup>

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22. Lynch, op. cit., p. 137

23. Miller, David; "False Prophets in the Secular City," The Meaning of the Death of God, Murchland (editor), p. 206

Evidence for this is not lacking and Altizer's work must be a veritable storehouse of examples with an immanence which swallows up transcendence, a God who is identified with Satan, the absolute mixing of sacred and profane to note but a few. The theme of replacing concern for oneself and egoism with one's identification of himself with his neighbor and his neighbor's needs, may also be evidence of the breakdown of a basic Western dialectic of the individual and the society. Not least nor to be forgotten is the embrace of the world in such a way that the creator fades away into oblivion, or man discovers in the possibilities of the here and now values competitive with those which were once projected on a paradisaical after-life. Everything which had been neatly put into its place by orthodox theology seems here to have "come unstuck," become confused, and much of it lost as new dominants come to the fore.

If Miller's suggestion is valid in this context, the confusion of the old contraries may be rising from some change in modern mentality, and some sensation that such is the case may be at the heart of the Christian atheists tendency to see his problems and his way of thinking as highly characteristic of his time. Given their anthropomorphic reference--as Samuel Miller calls it--which would insist that "whatever the divine means it means in reference to human experience,"<sup>24</sup> a radical change in theology would automatically follow from such a radical change in man's patterns of thought.

This may be a case of only a few men changing or reflecting a difference from the mentality which developed orthodox

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24. Miller, Samuel; op. cit., p. 68

Christian systems. However, if the policy of those few is to develop their theology from internal principles rather than those inherent in and imposed by the tradition, there would be great significance for orthodoxy in the kind of radical changes which would result. If orthodox Christianity embodied a given worldview, structural differences of a worldview kind which differed from that would essentially restructure the symbols. The only way in which this might be slowed down or postponed would be by insisting that revelation or a given metaphysics are the beginning point rather than man, which as Gilkey insists must not be done.<sup>25</sup> The Christian atheists would wholly agree with Gilkey.

At this point it is well to emphasise how natural to the history of religions is the reworking of a tradition of symbols and doctrines. Indeed, Mahayana and Theravada represent two radically different treatments of and developments from the same material. Likewise protestant theology was a radical reworking of medieval Roman theology, and Gnostic or Semitic Christianity were two quite distinct systems which failed to establish themselves as living traditions. To what extent such examples are relevant to the Christian atheists can hardly be determined at this early date and with the limited materials available now. It is however likely that if they can and do reflect some internal patterns hostile to orthodox Christianity which do not find satisfactory expression elsewhere, Christian atheists may be beginning a new reworking of Christian symbols and materials which will last.

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25. Gilkey, "Dissolution and Reconstruction in Theology," Frontline Theology, Peerman (editor), p. 34



The Christian atheists' anthropocentric and personalistic method of doing theology may therefore be of critical significance in evaluating their importance and achievement. It may only be that they reflect a problem in communicating the old orthodoxy but it may also be that they have achieved at least part of a reformulation consistent with changes so deep within the modern western cultural mindset that we have not yet become fully conscious of those changes and therefore cannot yet analyse them or even identify them in a highly systematic and rational mode.

## CHAPTER 18: The Secular Sacred

## Between Materialism and Theism

Failure to understand the full meaning of religious atheism results in two opposite criticisms. First, there are those who see in the Christian atheists the characteristics of a society which "is not only secular and non-mythological, but monochromatic and unidimensional--it sees life and reality all on one level, the material."<sup>1</sup> They are here accused of a "disastrously constricted" worldview,<sup>2</sup> and of being "bound to the world of the immediate, the world of natural causes, and human events."<sup>3</sup> Various, it may be said that with them "some lesser myth has come to be adequate to sustain and to create a smaller kind of human life."<sup>4</sup>

Such criticisms bear witness to the failure of Christian atheists to communicate their vision. This may well result from their own feeble grasp on the truth contained in it, to be sure, but it does not follow that the truth itself is inferior. It may be rather that the dissociation of the sacred of which Joseph Campbell complained has blinded Western men to the sacred potential innate to themselves and their world. In any case the Christian atheists go too far in their attempts to express their experiences of the sacred depths of existence, to be taken for men whose psyche is retarded, infantile or deformed with regard to the ability to probe toward ultimates.

Christian language, having served a God/world dualism, along with the deep cultural habit of separating the sacred

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1. Cooper, op. cit., p. 149

2. Shideler, op. cit., p. 124

3. Gilkey, op. cit., p. 35

4. Shideler, op. cit., p. 124

must account to no small extent for both the inadequacies of the Christian atheists' formulations and the insensitivity of their critics to their efforts to forge beyond an unreflective superficiality. However even in this aspect of their struggle against traditional Christian modes of thought and expression they witness to the Christian nature of their enterprise.

The opposite criticism would make the point that insofar as the Christian atheists do speak of the depths of human existence and its meaning or potential, they point to a dimension of that existence which transcends the narrow secular world.<sup>5</sup> In so doing it is said, "they look for God . . . they do not give up looking,"<sup>6</sup> and that they reveal "a deeply believing preoccupation with God."<sup>7</sup>

Such expressions witness further to the inability of many Christians to conceive a sacred which is not separable--not theistic. All language hinting at the sacred is taken to be but ill-formulated language about God. Only two possibilities appear to such a mentality: God or nothing. If it is allowed that the Christian atheists attempt to rise above an utterly superficial secularity, they can only do so by clumsy approximation to theistic development, however unaware of that they themselves may be.

The problems which more traditional Christians encounter in understanding and evaluating efforts of the Christian atheists must indicate many of the problems which they would face in

5. Gilkey, op. cit., p. 35

6. Hazelton, "The Future of God," The Meaning of the Death of God, Murchland (editor), p. 132

7. Adolfs, "Is God Dead?" The Meaning of the Death of God, Murchland (editor), p. 87

understanding Buddhism. In both cases the sacred is neither removed from the world nor is the world taken as devoid of the sacred. This requires some sensitivity toward the possibility that in man and his world is, in some sense, precisely that which always precludes containment, specificity, certainty, final verbal formulation. There must be, in other words, the ability to image a world in which the sacred is to be found by man and identified as a component of him and his world.

Two things can also be said specifically about the nature of Christian atheism which helps to define that segment of the population for whom they may speak as well as to clarify what they are saying. First, one can recognise that Christian atheism does not represent the vast numbers in the West who reflect a much greater dissociation from religion than even the most anti-religious Christian atheist. These are the men who have ceased to be concerned with theism and atheism at all, and who maintain no link with the forms of religion institutionally present or with the forms of religious materials culturally present--or maintain only the most minimal link with them such as obtains automatically by virtue of belonging to the culture. All that makes Christian atheism both religious and Christian is effectively irrelevant to them.

Secondly, Christian atheism does not reflect the traditional Christian pietism still deeply entrenched in the culture, and it is perhaps not irrelevant here that the Christian atheists are intellectuals, religious thinkers and theologians. As Michael Novak, commenting on this from the American side has said:



A deep gap has appeared between the theologians and the ordinary people of America: Those good churchgoing people whose Virgin is a tearful, prayerful, white Miss America of unimpeachable mealiness. The God of these good people is, for the theologians, dead.<sup>8</sup>

Mallard represents an almost exact example of this when he advocates the use of the term "atheism" to designate "a kind of popular polemic against the very crudely theistic notions found to such a disturbing extent through our society."<sup>9</sup>

Christian atheism therefore represents those somewhere between the irreligious who do not share the concern to reformulate the Christian worldview and those who still worship a transcendent deity who is all powerful and all good and who will help the faithful, judge and punish the evil and yet remain himself untainted by his fallen creation. In this position they are clearly neither devoid of concern over some reality, aspect of reality, or manner of viewing reality which we could designate as "sacred," nor are they either orthodox or wholly uniform in their response to and treatment of that concern.

#### Understanding the Secular Sacred

The Christian atheists are to be located, consequently, between the irreligious secularist and the man who believes in a transcendent God, between utter materialism and incipient theism. Joseph Campbell has probably best described this position as "the secularisation of the sacred" when by that one means "an opening of the sense of religious awe to some sphere

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8. Novak, op. cit., p. 82

9. Mallard, op. cit., pp. 337-338

of profane experience or, more marvellously, to the whole wonder of this world and oneself within it."<sup>10</sup> Thus that which could not in the past be regarded by theists as sacred cannot now come to be regarded otherwise, actually or potentially, by Christian atheists.

Three modes of understanding or of coming to grips with the secular sacred situation emerge from the writings of the Christian atheists. There is first the vision of a sacred world incubated in its own matrix of transcendence. Vahanian reflects this sensitivity when he asserts that culture "is a consecration of the world,"<sup>11</sup> and "the world is what takes place in and through the Word,"<sup>12</sup> intending in so saying a link with an iconoclastically or atheistically preserved transcendence. In the same vein he emphasises that "the Bible speaks of the transcendence of God almost as though it were an 'empirical' phenomenon" in support of his argument that "the word of man is man's access to the Word of God: No man can speak it, nor does any man speak who does not speak the word."<sup>13</sup> Only thus can the world become the answer to a self-imposed and cultural atheism. With the ability to conceive transcendence gone, the world becomes the focus for iconoclastic faithfulness.

Weil too echoes this in her cycle of themes: Necessity must be loved even as is God;<sup>14</sup> to love God "can only mean the order of the world and one's neighbor;"<sup>15</sup> this world "is the mirror of this love which is God himself;"<sup>16</sup> "this world insofar

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10. Campbell, *op. cit.*, p. 601

11. Vahanian, "Beyond the Death of God," *op. cit.*, p. 11

12. Vahanian, No Other God, p. 56

13. *Ibid.*, p. 41

14. Weil, First and Last Notebooks, p. 324

15. *Ibid.*, p. 81

16. Weil, Intimations of Christianity, p. 103

as it is completely empty of God, is God himself;"<sup>17</sup> and "God and the supernatural are hidden and formless in the universe."<sup>18</sup> In this vision man is given himself and creation for the goal of decreation but the whole--man, creation, decreation, is God himself.

In this development one cannot abandon the symbols of the transcendent God and the world of man but they do not stand for two separate things. Rather they suggest the extremities of that which man knows as his existence as as the polar tensions sustaining a reality which is at once diverse and indivisible. On the one hand that suggests a bounded world with a mysterious transcendent beyond, and other than it; and on the other hand it indicates within man himself and his world another face of that same mystery, at once different from and identical with it.

The second mode of understanding the secular sacred situation reflects a direct attack upon the traditional polarities precisely because they are not two separate things. This understanding selects one set of the pair of opposites to name all that was previously intended and thereby deny that they are different. Altizer fits here with his motif of world affirmation and God negation. To him the sacred is the profane, the religious is secular, God is the world, spirit is flesh. The unity is therefore that of predication rather than conjunction so that man is to know the sacred as not the transcendent extension of God and the immanent intension of the world; but rather as the transcendent which is immanent.

17. Weil, Gravity and Grace, p. 99

18. Ibid., p. 49

Behind Van Buren's, Hamilton's, Braun's, Kee's and even Bonhoeffer's general themes of secularity is just such a pattern as well. There is an impatience with and belief in the inequality of one half of the old dialectical structure and this impatience is not satisfied with a pattern of using both halves to achieve one whole. Rather, it is based on a choice of one over the other which assigns to the chosen one the qualities of the rejected one, thus using the less preferred to qualify the more preferred.

A third understanding replaces the old geographical polarisation with a temporal one. Thus Mallard speaks of "the radical incarnation of the Infinite, yet its openness towards man's future" so that he can identify "the 'sacred' as now specifically the tension of human freedom toward its secular future."<sup>19</sup> Likewise he can speak of that tension as "the Kingdom,"<sup>20</sup> --an ancient Christian symbol for the perfect sacred environment.

Sölle's sacred present is also extended towards and into a sacred future and even carries the hint of a special event toward which man might specifically look and which he can even cause or prevent by his decision for or against Christ's representationalism: Namely the moment when representation is ended. As Sölle emphasises, provisionality is part of the structure of representation which cannot be removed without representation collapsing into replacement.<sup>21</sup> Thus representation is part of the very form of the world and man himself

19. Mallard, op. cit., pp. 335 and 338

20. Ibid., p. 328

21. Sölle, op. cit., p. 134



and thereby future identity is also already a part of present representation as well.<sup>22</sup> The mystery of what this can mean constitutes an openness in man's future equivalent to the indeterminacy of which Mallard writes.

This theme of preserving an openness to the sacred by reference to the mystery of the future can be found in minor aspects of Van Buren's and Hamilton's thought as well. Van Buren tells us, for example, that "whatever he is, this God is not a finished, fixed or identifiable figure, person or concept" but rather "a future coming to meet man" which "will be 'all in all'" providing "a way to walk" and waiting "somewhere out ahead of man."<sup>23</sup>

Hamilton in his early book The New Essence of Christianity suggested an eschatological solution to the suffering/impassible dichotomy of God rather than the solution of the trinity, which would see Jesus' lordship over the world as now one of humiliation but in a time "that is to come, or that we are to come to," as one of victory and power.<sup>24</sup> Hamilton is careful however to insist that this cannot support an "otherworldliness" which "commits us to a belief in the existence of some space beyond the known space of this world,"<sup>25</sup> and perhaps it was due to the difficulty in avoiding this that he did not develop the theme further.

In this third development the Christian atheists show a heritage of apocalypticism and eschatology which gives away

22. Ibid.

23. Van Buren, The Edges of Language, p. 76

24. Hamilton, The New Essence of Christianity, pp. 94 and 109

25. Ibid., p. 110

their cultural base and identifies its difference from Buddhism, for Buddhism as we have said knows no finality of a temporal kind either in the past or in the future. Time is never so concrete either because it lacks dharmic reality or because every time is ultimately empty of separate reality, as we pointed out in connection with Altizer's misunderstanding.

However, Buddhism, especially in its Mahayana form, might make use of dialectical symbols in a manner like that of the first characterisation of the sacred. There saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are such, subject to the unifying function of śūnyatā or prajñā. Likewise when Theravada directs its followers to the realisation that they are meaningful as what they are only in saṃsāra and that the epitomy of this (sopādhīśeṣa-nirvāṇa) somehow also connotes what was intended by the separate symbol of nirvāṇa, we have a pattern parallel to the second mode of understanding or characterising the sacred.

#### The Rejection of Nihilism

Whether it utilises a dialectical structure to describe two aspects of one indivisible unity; whether it merges one side of a dialectical pair into the other so that the one can stand alone yet complete in the meaning of the two; or whether it polarises the dialectical structure in the present and the future times to provide both the principle of unity and distinction, Christian atheism intends to assert that the sacred and profane are one in human reality. In so doing they position themselves in contrast to those who believe that man without an external deity has no alternative to nihilism. Comstock is one who made this criticism when he wrote:

The death of this [the traditional] God means not only the end of belief in a certain anthropomorphic deity, but, more important, the death of all the functions that he performed for Western man. With him goes the sense of a transcendent and ultimate norm for the value of this world, of a final purpose and a single meaning which could serve as a focus for human aspiration. With him goes the religious aspect, the metaphysical structure, the sacred dimension of existence.<sup>26</sup>

Ultimately it is from precisely such a position that the Christian atheist seeks liberation by his rejection of theism. The richest potential of Buddhism and Christian atheism is in the meaning for them which the world is quite able to reveal for itself; and in the challenge of man's unrelieved involvement with himself and his environment. Both provide conclusive evidence that sacred purposes and values having to do with what man finds immediately at hand are born from individual effort which is socially cognisant and independent of an otherworldly reality.

This means that they can arrive at and develop from essentially that principle which the scientific atheist, Jacques Monod, called "the ethic of knowledge," which is a pattern of life emerging from patterns within man's own mind which in turn are the reflection of the patterns and structures of the world itself.<sup>27</sup> Altizer may speak of the chaos which God's death would appear to leave us with but he can do so only in the context of his own keen understanding of all that man affirms in his Yes-saying to the world. Like Nietzsche, the

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26. Comstock, op. cit., p. 217

27. Monod, Change and Necessity, p. 165

Buddhists and Christian atheists may develop nihilistic themes but only to serve the purpose of their constructive visions.

The ethic of knowledge is rooted first in the inherited experiences of our ancestors formulated, Monod tells us, as logic; and secondly in the experiences we ourselves undergo.<sup>28</sup> As such it is wholly human and can be sacred only if something of humanity is sacred. This witnesses also to both the social cohesiveness of mankind throughout his extension in time and space and to his critical solitude at some point. It affirms a logic which perceives distinctions by designating their identity, so that neither separation nor unity dominate.

Together these principles support the point that the sacred is nurtured by personal effort but as it is actualised in the individual man is finally itself impersonal. This means that the Christian doctrine of eternal life--personal human continuation without limit (i.e. infinite), is utterly reversed. The sacred reality is born from selflessness, whether envisioned as impermanence or insubstantiality (*anicca* or *nairātmya*), as the utter rejection of the possessive tendency (e.g. Weil and the Theravada) or the affirmation of the oneness of humanity (e.g. Altizer and the Mahayana).

Ultimately then, the only final loss resulting from the rejection of the theistic God is the loss of eternal selfhood. The alternative structure affirmed by atheism in Christianity and Buddhism is of a relational nature which emerges from the individuality which one begins with to deny the boundaries which create such individuality and to affirm the superior truth of the sacred reality which the world itself is or may be.

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28. Ibid., pp. 145-148



Thus we have the movement of the Divine in the thought of Simone Weil. Bonhoeffer speaks of finite man's belonging to the infinity of Divine absence, impotence and suffering. Iconoclastic culture faithful to a transcendent God in a way single men can never be and from its own immanent resources is put forward by Gabriel Vahanian. Living for others as the awesome self-transcending mystery involves one in the edges of language in Van Buren's thought, in an eschatological theology in Kee's, and in the experiences of obligation for which the potent symbol "God" is appropriate in Braun's. Altizer commits himself to the Great Humanity Divine as a full coincidencia oppositorum. Sölle's highest vision is of the Christ containing the universal representation: All of mankind and all of God. Finally, Mallard speaks of a process--mankind stretching into the future --as a unity of all immanence and transcendence.

Profoundly important is the fact that we could pass through this series again, extracting other themes from these principles or other variations on these themes. This reveals the nature of atheistic formulations, whether realised by the Christian atheists or not (and to the extent that they attempt to finalise a dogma it is not realised). That nature is one of continual development. The theological "method" of atheism is thus inseparable from its message. Issues are always, in such thought, both substantive and procedural with a thoroughness which is likely to be underestimated.

In Buddhism this is provided for in the realisation that men change through their grasp of truth which is perfected in them in a manner which allows the Theravada to speak of the paths to nirvāṇa and the Mahayana to speak of the stages of

Bodhisattvahood. In Monod's ethic of knowledge it is represented in the unending confrontation of the apparently objective structures which can be discovered in human thought and action with the immediacy of human experience.

The Christian atheists too struggle to understand and communicate what they understand but they are caught in the on-goingness of relativity. What does come through however is that this is not the chaos and nothingness of nihilism but rather the pattern of existence and its decisive potential, so that it could only be theism which reflects a kind of nihilism insofar as it refuses to allow man and his world to be what they are.

The final truth which addresses itself to both the method and content of atheism is that of the removal of the absolute from its position of dominance over the world and the recognition of an existence consistent with the subsequent relativity. In so doing it formulates the problem of the absolute as not thereby resolved but therein approached. Atheism then cannot address itself to anything less than did theism but it can do so and does do so in a fundamentally different manner.

## CHAPTER 19: Heterodoxy and Orthodoxy

## Identifying the Problem

Christian atheists reject that form of dualism which survived in what is now regarded as orthodox theism's persistent need to protect a holy God from contamination or challenge by a fallen world and dependent reality. The dualism always was qualified but these qualifications could not prevent two effects: (1) the alienation of all that man senses as sacred, numinous or even just utterly special from the stuff of which he and his world are made, and (2) the resultant deprecation of, distaste for, resentment of, and attempted rejection of that which man came to know as himself and his natural world.

Insofar as atheism reverses these effects it is not a corrective of poor theology (i.e. the doctrine of God) but of poor anthropology and cosmology. When orthodoxy and even some Christian atheists, suggest that atheism protects the transcendent aspect of God they either miss this point or do not address themselves to it. Such an atheism designed to protect the transcendent God of theism would only intensify the remoteness of the sacred and the unrelieved profanity of the earth and her inhabitants. Rather, true atheism reinterprets man and his world to himself. It seeks to find its eternal truths deep within the world's structures, its purposes in their use, and its end in their potential or actual nature.

Consistent atheism therefore, is in its full structure as much the enemy of theology (the doctrine of God) as of idolatry and if it protects a transcendent God, as it does in certain aspects of Vahanian's, Sölle's and Weil's thought, it subsequently also throws man back upon his own resources and confines

man within the limitations of his own reality. When atheism functions religiously it can never be as a covert way of returning to man the transcendent reality of God. It is rather a way through which man in his understanding of himself and his world struggles by human effort either to read the sacred in the world or to write it there. Weil, Vahanian and Sölle are thus examples of the most subtle and complex atheism--that clearly having this dual aspect.

It is precisely because of this that atheism can embrace religious language and materials, acknowledging and wishing to speak of the numinous in space and time, of the holy life or holy states of being, of the mysterious, the transrational, the depths, heights and inner truth of the world. Indeed to the atheist it must seem that it is rather theism which cannot know of or speak of the sacred, which must constantly qualify and protect from true worldliness its epiphanies or theophanies. The theist will never know anything but reflected light, mediated and adapted, but the atheist lives in and is of the source of light itself.

Orthodox theology in its efforts to moderate and mediate the dualism of the transcendent God through the doctrines of the immanent aspect of God, providence, grace, incarnation, revelation, indeed all aspects of divine intervention, redemption and presence tends toward atheism as we understand it. Insofar as Christianity has been aware that it cannot formulate a doctrine of pure transcendence, it has qualified theism in an atheistic direction so that even supposedly theistic Christians sometimes do not believe that man cannot save himself, that the totality of creation has been subject to the Fall and is wicked



in comparison to the awesome standard of Divine reality, and that indeed man would be lost with all creation had God not provided a solution.

The immanent aspect of God and the doctrine of the trinity are the ultimate qualifications of theism by orthodoxy and in any consideration of atheism such as that in which we have engaged they must demonstrate the difficulties in definition and designation. It is in this context that Nels Ferré's article "God Without Theism"<sup>1</sup> can be regarded as a good example of an increasing impatience within modern orthodoxy itself with the problem as traditionally developed. It recognises that the rigorous definition of terms and the clear separation of categories have guaranteed that theistic doctrines are never fully consistent with the demands of Western logic, insight and intuition.

This suggests that the process of posing theism against atheism in a dialectical treatment creates tensions unnatural to both and that this is sensed by theists today as readily as Christian atheists sense the same unease at the theistic separation of sacred and profane, religious and secular and so on. In this light the dialectically stimulated movement toward synthesis must be regarded as an attempt by both theists and atheists to resolve the nearly intolerable tensions resulting from the treatment of two conceptual units as thesis and antithesis or as mutually negating opposites.

If Christian atheism is one indication of the need to overcome spiritually, psychologically, and perhaps even

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1. Ferré, op. cit.

culturally intolerable divisions arising from dialectical formulations, it is also the case that the thinking which came from Vatican II is a further example of that same need as experienced, and responded to, by a major segment of modern Christians. Nor is it by chance, therefore that this is illustrated specifically in its approach to atheism.

This new Roman Catholic thinking is evolving within and perhaps beyond what we have been regarding as one form of orthodox Christianity and demonstrates well the fluidity of the entire area of theism/atheism for which dialectical treatment used to give great clarification but with regard to which it now seems only the source of an original distortion. As finally this relates to our understanding of Christian atheism as a problem and as a form of Christianity, it is appropriate to consider here two themes reflecting these changes.

#### On Taking Atheism Seriously

First and most fundamental is the recognition that atheism cannot be separated from how theology is being done. Past forms of thought saw the matter far too simply and a new depth of complexity is admitted with such assertions as: "Weighty are the questions which atheism raises."<sup>2</sup> Likewise theism itself may have been taken too lightly and the prevalence of incorrect or inadequate theology with regard to it is recognised as contributing to the increase in atheism.<sup>3</sup>

In an implicit admission that difficulties may be being created by present theological methods, the Second Vatican

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2. Reid, op. cit., p. 187

3. Gaudium et spes (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), Art. 29, The Documents of Vatican II, Abbott (editor), p. 217; cf. Reid, op. cit., p. 64

Council invited theologians to seek more suitable ways of communicating doctrine.<sup>4</sup> The task of aggiornamento which has become so critical since the Council has itself come to be seen as valid and proper interpretation, development and utilisation of the teachings of the Church in terms of the people to whom they must be conveyed, and in light of the past. Roman theologians may still oppose Tillich's method of correlation but principles functioning essentially as it did underly these activities.

The biggest step to be made in the direction of a new treatment of and attitude toward atheism was that of recognising that there could be a true and guiltless atheism. As Reid understood:

It is a cheap and facile apologetics that attempts to win a point by declaring that there are no absolute unbelievers and that every man who claims to be such is deceiving himself and others. This is to undervalue or even deny the seriousness of another man's most earnest affirmation about himself.<sup>5</sup>

If one insists that either theism or idolatry cover all possibilities, a guiltless and honest atheism could not be acknowledged. Idolatry does not lend itself to moral neutrality but perhaps, given a certain attitude, atheism could. Indeed it was precisely this which the Vatican II discussions and proclamations sought, and which, incidentally, Vahanian's recommendation of methodological atheism depends upon. Likewise Sölle is assuming that atheism due to the death of God as a

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4. Gaudium et spes, Art. 62, op. cit., p. 268

5. Reid, op. cit., p. 14

cultural phenomenon can be tolerated within Christian morality provided that Christ is acknowledged as representative.

The result of Vatican II was to date such thinkers as Étienne Borne who insisted that "atheism and religious consciousness are opposed one to the other as the limits of negation and affirmation so that war between them is inevitable, all possibility of compromise, toleration or reconciliation being completely removed."<sup>6</sup> Reid summarises the new understanding:

After the Council it is impossible for a theologian to go on regarding the atheist as such as a fool or a villain; his present and most urgent task is to seek out the many and diverse causes of atheism, which can no longer be reduced merely to stupidity or moral perversity.<sup>7</sup>

Thus the new thesis that there might be a guiltless atheism gained credence. Karl Rahner tells us that while it "is not set out in so many words" it is implicit:

. . . in the reference to the fact that, on the one hand, there exists an explicit atheism, which is widespread spacially, and is held to be self-evident in its simplicity, while on the other hand general Christian principles do not entitle us simply to condemn such atheists as being gravely guilty before God.<sup>8</sup>

The implication is twofold. What atheists say is taken as honest and sincere and not just a cover-up for idolatry; and the possibility of a generally guiltless atheism is acknowledged. Thus "the Council allows that atheism need not bar a man from the way of salvation, provided he has not acted contrary to the

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6. Borne, op. cit., p. 9

7. Reid, op. cit., p. 62

8. Rahner, "The Teaching of the Second Vatican Council on Atheism," Concilium: Atheism and Indifference, March, 1967, p. 6



dictate of his conscience."<sup>9</sup> Theoretically there is no immediate reason that the Christian atheists must be condemned by this qualification for they represent clearly the often painful regard for honesty and faithfulness to conscience.

It was precisely for this honesty to personal experience that some theologians criticised the Christian atheists, reminding them of their duty to the tradition, and while Reid is certainly not concerned specifically with their situation, he is here talking about a thesis which itself is not yet set in a specific context and which therefore could be considered in locating the Christian atheist in respect to orthodox Christians. It may well be that the Roman Catholics who formulated this thesis were displaying a greater sensitivity to the ambiguities of the human situation than regard for the defence of the dogma, and this will be faulted by fundamentalist protestants and conservative Romans alike. Yet its great advantage is that it allows an approach with the possibility for mutual respect between theistic Christians and atheists and only in such a climate can a basis for understanding and progress in understanding be sought.

There is perhaps a greater sense of confidence in the statements of someone like Bonhoeffer or Braun than Reid suggests when he speaks of the fact that "most modern unbelievers are not so much unwilling as unable to make the act of faith."<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, we could generally agree if this were formulated as: "Not so much unwilling as convinced that

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9. Reid, op. cit., p. 104

10. Ibid., p. 152

orthodox Christian theism is, for various reasons, not personally valid." Christian atheists are those who in all conscience believe the traditional faith is an impossibility for themselves and for many other modern men.

In this development within the Roman Catholic response to atheism, such characteristics as "fidelity to conscience, the honest seeking for truth, and the vigorous sensitivity to the demands of moral awareness" come to be associated with "the upright atheist who cannot be excluded from the path of salvation" so that in some sense "moral integrity can supply for explicit belief in God or serve as its surrogate."<sup>11</sup> Reid suggests this occurs because an atheist so characterised in his faithfulness to the dictate of conscience is bound "to a transcendent order of which God is author and ultimate foundation."<sup>12</sup>

Such thought is purely Vahanian in form, for while Vahanian does not say the same thing in these words it is this which the whole state of Christian men is hopefully resting on in a time when they cannot be theists. That such is the case is their only hope for if there cannot be an atheism which correlates with the transcendent order in the world, they cannot properly relate to God during this phase in the culture when the concept of the transcendent is dead. It is also this which effectively makes it valid to concern oneself with the immanent world and which makes its transcendent aspect which man should discover some day again, only a form of the immanent aspect.

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11. Ibid., pp. 105-106

12. Ibid., p. 109

### Taking Secularism Seriously

Another emphasis which developed with Vatican II's consideration of unbelief was more directly related to the debate on non-Christian religions but it is also relevant to Reid's categories of those who have never believed and those who have lapsed from orthodox Christianity.<sup>13</sup> This point, developed most clearly in the thought of the Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, revolves around the thesis that "man who is commanded to have a religion, is also commanded to seek and accept a social form of religion."<sup>14</sup>

It must be noted however, that Rahner intends a rather special meaning when he speaks of the social form of religion for he recognised that Christianity as presented in a non-Christian country by missionaries could not necessarily claim that members of the social form of religion already present there were morally obligated to convert to a Christianity not sufficiently established to possess itself a true social form. Thus he speaks of "the moment when the gospel really enters into the historical situation of an individual,"<sup>15</sup> and this moment becomes critical to the matter of identifying that point at which, before God, one is obligated to express an explicitly Christian belief.

Short of that explicit conversion to Christianity which may not be obligatory if the Church does not exist as a social form, no "existentially real demand is made by the absolute religion in its historical tangible form,"<sup>16</sup> and the individual

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13. Ibid., p. xiv

14. Rahner, Theological Investigations, Vol. V, p. 120

15. Ibid., p. 121

16. Ibid., p. 119

who follows "the supernatural, gracefilled elements"<sup>17</sup> of his own religion participates in something lawful and may find salvation. This means that "it must be possible to be not only an anonymous theist but also an anonymous Christian."<sup>18</sup> What is involved in this is the recognition that salvation can be found outside orthodox Christianity and that this is so even if Christianity is not wholly unknown. Indeed, it is true up to "the point in time when the Christian religion becomes a historically real factor."<sup>19</sup>

We introduce these concepts for several reasons. First of all, as a point of interest, it is clear that the belief that a religion must have a social form is again in accord with Vahanian's thought. Secondly, however, if as Vahanian himself points out, Christianity is no longer able to sustain a culturally viable concept of God it could be argued that our own culture does not possess a theistic religion which really enters into the historical situation of individuals, making an existentially real demand.

Vahanian thus suggests that our situation parallels the situation of men in non-Christian cultures in that it has fallen away from that point or that moment when it could be subject to "the absolute obligation of the Christian religion."<sup>20</sup> Indeed it is precisely this which is intended with the phrase "post-Christian age," and which has been used with this meaning by many theologians of our time.

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17. Ibid., p. 121

18. Ibid., p. 132

19. Ibid., p. 121

20. Ibid., p. 120



The Roman Catholic line of thought developed by Rahner and underlying Vatican II proclamations concerning non-Christian religions, seeks to find and recognise those elements in a culture which are valid and lawful even if not specifically Christian. In terms of its treatment of atheism of a non-Christian kind in our culture (e.g. communism and humanism), it represented an attempt to find that which through modern Western secular morality could bring one to salvation. Thus it recognised God's universal truths which exist independently of institutional Christianity and it recognised man's ability to seek, find and abide by these truths even when outside and linked with beliefs in opposition to orthodox Christianity.<sup>21</sup>

If the Roman Catholics were prepared to accept that all too often in our culture Christianity is not an historically real factor, and does not make an existentially real demand, they might understand how the Christian atheists can suggest a form of Christianity which does not itself possess a social form but lives in the social forms which it finds--i.e. in the secular world with a secular consciousness and conscience illumined by the truth which they found in secular seeking. This too would give them a particular light into the belief of the Christian atheists that such order as man needs and ought to live by will be discoverable in his secular reality.

Indeed, if Christianity has collapsed in our culture and exists institutionally only as it does in non-Christian cultures where it has a culturally peripheral effort established, the state of men in Western, previously Christian areas,

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21. Ibid., pp. 118 and 121

is indistinguishable theologically from that of men in other non-Christian areas. They too must abide by truths as expressed in the social forms available to them and they must be faithful to the moral dictates of their conscience. All of the Christian atheists would essentially agree with this although they might disagree among themselves as to the reason for the situation, the moral obligations discovered in it, and its prognosis.

Christians who remain with a theistic faith which they attempt to keep essentially in its traditional orthodox form will need then, not just to encounter, evaluate and respond to non-Christians but to those Christians as well who insist that both their conscience and also truth as they discover it in their world, demand atheism. Thinking which allows traditional theistic Christians to grant that these atheists may be "saved" by Christian standards--at least leaving that possibility open --will serve the purpose of promoting respect and understanding and thus decrease interpersonal tension.

Something of the understanding which might be expected to apply eventually to non-orthodox Christians within Western culture as much as to the non-Christian man of other non-Christian cultures may be seen in Rahner's concept of "open Catholicism" which views the Church as seeking to overcome as much of the pluralism around her "as should not exist" and as "understanding herself as the higher unity of this opposition" represented by the "'worldly' forces."<sup>22</sup>

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22. Ibid., p. 115

## CONCLUSION

## On Being Christian

It could be argued that the term "Christian atheism" does not designate a phenomenon sufficiently cohesive to constitute a school nor does it represent something which has sustained itself sufficiently well with clear signs of growth and development to be regarded as a movement. However the term can certainly be used to name the situation of an undetermined number of people today, some of whom have gone to considerable effort to communicate the nature of and to understand the meaning of this situation. We have at times indicated our own interpretation of the situation which will now be reviewed in each of its two aspects--Christian and atheist--as the format for our final summary and comments.

Christian atheism is a situation which is first and foremost characterised by its Christian nature. The person who knows such a situation as his own is involved in Christian symbols, activities, claims, modes of thought. Christianity is his tradition with roots usually in the depths of his childhood and the cultural foundations of his self. He has formulated his search and concerns in terms of Christian materials and expectations, many of which became part of his psyche long before he can remember. He may realise very keenly that to cast himself off from these and to sever his internal vision and thought processes from them would handicap and imperil his quest for meaning and for a coherent formulation of himself and his environment. He thus embodies Jung's assertion: "Our whole modern mentality has been moulded by Christianity" and

"this has nothing to do with whether we believe the truth of Christianity or not."<sup>1</sup>

Nor does this prejudice our argument that our's is a post-Christian era. The Christian atheists are excellent evidence that the cultural residue of a religious tradition does not transmit the order and coherent doctrinal whole of the orthodox form of that tradition. Indeed, it seems likely that once religious materials are detached from their traditional setting they tend to generate new settings of their own which change their form and texture so that they do not automatically fit back into their original place when it is described to the man who is working with them. "God" is clearly such a fragment with the Christian atheists witnessing to the inability of the original meaning to fit their present experience of and understanding of reality.

In our day many, because of the tensions between their own beliefs and traditional ones, do sometimes attempt to find a place for themselves outside religion or in some culturally alien religious tradition. By the same token many of these same people are dismayed at the inadequacies and unsatisfying results of such a break. Simone Weil showed unusual awareness of precisely this point when she emphasised that nearly always one's own religion is more effective for one's quest than an adopted religion, regardless of how imperfect and inadequate that inherited religion is.<sup>2</sup>

We would insist that the Christian atheist has a right to be considered Christian in a more specific manner than this,

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1. Jung, Psychology and Alchemy, p. 142

2. Weil, Letter to a Priest, p. 30; Waiting on God, p. 117



however. He is also Christian therefore, because he is a participant in a situation which should be of unique interest to all Christians, being uniquely Christian in its form: Namely the rejection of theism (for a variety of reasons). If Christian atheism is to come to understand itself and if orthodoxy is to explore the nature of a problem which cannot but be crucial to its own beliefs, both must enter into dialogue and not seek to carry on two monologues. In a very real sense, the experience of God and the absence of the experience of God (as Hamilton put it)<sup>3</sup> are concerned with the same subject, at least at this point.

If Christian atheists accept themselves as Christian and are accepted as such by other Christians at least in these senses, it is difficult to see how they could or why they should exist outside a community of communicating Christians. Quite apart from whether or not they wish to make use of such traditional materials as rites and rituals which Christian communities like other communities possess, they could certainly make use of the community itself for inspiration, growth, development and sharing.

One can readily understand the criticism that Christian communities tend to be highly artificial units isolated from the every day life of their members, and it is easy to see that the fear of such pitfalls as this lies behind much of the Christian atheists' anti-ecclesiastical stance. Still it does not appear that they are opposed to community per se and much of what they say would even indicate that they are well aware

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3. Hamilton, "The Death of God Theologies Today," *op. cit.*, p. 28

of the importance of giving a community aspect to their Christianity (accepting their own definition of Christian). They understand that their Christianity must be and grow as a social reality especially in the context of that Christian atheist theme which posits the ultimate importance of the individual in precisely his social participation.

When the Christian atheists attempted to understand the Church as embodied in society in many other ways than those we have come to identify habitually, they did not assume that such a Church is such or will remain such without community effort. It can readily be accepted that religion as an ecclesiastical reality is a problem for Christian atheism, therefore, but the criticism can still be made as well that they tended to dispose of this problem in a manner which was far too superficial. In so doing they doubtless reflected the superficial manner in which many branches of orthodoxy attempted to dispose of Christian atheism, but it is our opinion that the breach which both sides created with their instinctive reactions of mutual rejection must be healed for the sake of the growth of both.

Richard Rubenstein, regarded as a Jewish "Death of God" theologian, has taken issue with Bonhoeffer by suggesting that our problem is not "how to speak of God in an age of no religion" but "how to speak of religion in an age of no God."<sup>4</sup> He put this point because he is one who is passionately attached to tradition and religion and like Weil asserts that:

. . . all major religions are  
psychologically true for their  
believers. As such they are deeply

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4. Rubenstein, After Auschwitz, p. 153

congruent with the needs and identities of their participants.<sup>5</sup>

In agreement with these principles we do not see how Christianity can be meaningfully isolated from religion, religiousness and the Church, and we would suggest that it is perhaps part of the responsibility of the Christian atheists to make the point that they are Christian in the sense of being in and not out of the social forms of Christianity designated by the Church. By doing so they would draw attention to the need of orthodoxy to discover anew the fundamental assertions of the faith in the modern environment and to understand in dialogue the sense in which their own changing and growing vision relates to a changing theism.

Finally, we should like to see a constructive and continuing interaction between theism and atheism largely because this is one area dominated by the present dialectical mode of thought and therefore is fertile ground for the development of a new, "relational" mode which would learn and grow not through the identity of unresolvable differences but through the exploration of infinite relativities. Progress in this area would seem to us to be essential and not unrelated to the issue of whether or not mankind and the earth can continue in a constructive and creative way.

#### On Being Atheistic

The second aspect of the situation which has concerned us is the atheistic one. Here our study of Christian atheism and Buddhism suggests certain minimal truths of religious atheism,

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5. Ibid., p. 148

three of which are fundamental and should be reviewed. The first of these concerns the nature of the world which as the whole of reality may be seen in many ways but must ultimately provide within itself the solutions to its own problems. Inherent within worldly reality must be the ultimate questions and the ultimate answers to those questions.

Religious atheism is fully able to reflect the same quality of belief about certain questions and answers as is to be found in the great religious traditions of the world. When this quality of belief pertains it understands those questions and answers about man and his reality to be ultimate in that the believer sees them as transcending himself, his perception of them, his ability to respond to them. They exist therefore, in a seemingly autonomous manner and he understands his grasp of them to be but a mere approximation to their full reality.

Religious truth always has a quality of ineffability therefore, and the atheists will find they must allow for this principle of uncertainty, chance, mystery or whatever it is called as surely as must the theists, scientists and philosophers and all others who would encompass the full scope of reality, and thus conceive a whole. The Christian atheists' relative impatience with the demands of logic and reason must reflect awareness of this, even as does their use of symbols, images and myths to convey their vision.

The second truth concerns man who is both autonomous insofar as he is ultimately responsible for himself, and soulless. Both of these aspects of man must hold however contradictory, paradoxical or ambiguous they may be made to appear. In the final analysis therefore, man must contain within himself both



question and answer, problem and solution, on an equivalent level with this truth about the world. Salvation must relate to something which man can actualise in a manner natural to his humanity. By the same token this means that man's finitude must be fully acknowledged.

The Christian atheists tended to understand man's limited reality in terms of his condition as a part of the wider, more primary social reality. The Buddhist principles of *anicca* and *nairatmya* reveal a potential sophistication of this truth far beyond the very superficial stabs at its development which we find in the Christian atheists. It is possible however that this characteristic tendency to think of the ongoing historical reality of the human phenomenon (e.g. Altizer's *Great Humanity Divine*) rather than the more ethereal image of the *Dharmakāya* or the more concrete image of streams of *dharma*s, witnesses to both the very Christian and very Western nature of their mindset.

Be that as it may, the Christian atheists have shown their willingness to accept and their commitment to imagine the world extended in space and time as a reality more primary than that of the individual man, and individual men as real only insofar as they know their own reality is contingent upon the larger more primary one. The egoless theme of their ethic is thus comparable to the *nairātmya* aspect of the *Dharmakāya* and the *anatta* aspect of *saṃsāra*'s *saṃskṛta* *dharma*s.

The third truth concerns the sacred which is transpersonal and worldly, and thus is neither God nor man. Rather man knows his union with the world and knows the sacred as belonging to that world with which he is united. Never, however, could he

segregate himself, his world and the sacred into three or, combining two of the trio, into two fundamental realities. Whatever the subtleties of his formulation beyond this the sacred permeates in some form his whole and thus also something of what he is.

The religious atheist is awed by what he gains when he loses himself and his God. He feels that the object of his concern, indeed of his passionate quest, eludes the distinctions and confines assigned to it by his tradition. It is because of this that he is sometimes confused and confusing. If he adopts the language of division (internal/external, objective/subjective, sacred/profane, God/man, finite/infinite) to describe the unity, he appears absurd or tautological (of course nothing is absolutely distinguishable as only one or the other). If he abandons this language he must develop a new way of speaking which will not be immediately meaningful to those unfamiliar with it.

The Christian atheist is thus caught in a severe linguistic dilemma. He might feel, for example, that he could use the word "God" but if he is not allowed to alter or rework its meanings he must seek an alternative term. As no other term may be quite so appropriate for adaptation to his purposes the alternatives may prove too inadequate, too insubstantial for his vision. In such a situation "God" may say too much in other contexts, and "the sacred," for example, too little in his.

The first truth separates the religious atheist from the theist but the other two represent the foundation stones of his system. We must say that from this point on, comparisons

with the great edifices of theism and Buddhism reveal atheism's diminutive stature however, and the linguistic difficulties, sectarian antagonisms or the imperfection of the culturally present religious materials will not wholly account for this. Yet the need is not diminutive nor the situation of the Christian atheist unworthy, for the full pathos and promise of the human condition is represented in them.

It may be important to this point that only Weil and Bonhoeffer, our only World War II atheists, attempted to aggressively incorporate the dark and tragic side of existence, whereas those who wrote in the 1960's and 1970's were struggling so hard for affirmation and optimism that they avoided the more troubled depths of the human soul. Rubenstein was one who criticised the radical theologians of the past decade for their "inability to take seriously the tragic vision."<sup>6</sup>

Specifically Rubenstein felt that Christian atheism tended to believe in real, substantial human progress and in so doing to ignore the destructive side of history. This weakness he saw as a continuation of the same weakness in Christian and even Jewish thought and it caused him to assert in reflection upon Hitler's efforts to exterminate the Jewish race:

To see any purpose in the death camps, the traditional believer is forced to regard the most demonic antihuman explosion in all history as a meaningful expression of God's purposes. The idea is simply too obscene for me to accept.<sup>7</sup>

The idea that a world which includes such events is the incarnation of the transcendent must certainly be equally

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6. Rubenstein, op. cit., pp. x-xi

7. Ibid., p. 153

obscene to him and he does not believe in substantial moral progress on the level of whole societies.<sup>8</sup> If Rubenstein wished to phrase his criticism so, he could certainly accuse the later Christian atheists of failing to develop a theodicy. His judgement however demonstrates clearly that the discovery that man has no God does not solve the problem of evil and suffering.

We would suggest that such desperate failings as this point directly to the highly polemical nature of Christian atheism in the 1960's, and its frantic concern to be modern, worldly or secular. It seemed to understand far more clearly what it could not allow, what threatened and crushed it, than it did the nature of its own inner life and the principles of its own growth.

While Buddhism does not offer atheism on a platter to Christians who have come to know themselves as without God, Christian atheism has much to learn from it of the richness, brilliance, vitality and complexity of which a great atheistic religious tradition is capable. The key to the religious future of the Christian atheist may well lie in a study of Buddhism not because it will answer his questions directly (indeed he is unlikely to ask the kind of questions which Buddhism is culturally designed to answer) but because it may show him afresh how to start and how to continue.

What is intended here is threefold and is symbolised by the three refuges: The Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. For the Christian atheist it means that he must not disdain to

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8. Ibid., p. 106



learn from the God, gods or god-like men of the past who he may find, upon attentive and reflective listening to their words (the Dharma, Truth or Law), have said far more about his situation than he conceived possible, and in the process of speaking to and sometimes from that situation have inspired a great community of men who also listen and also reflect, and also themselves, even if they do not realise it, speak to him truths about his situation.

Our final evaluation of and characterisation of the Christian atheist then is to agree with William Hamilton: Thursday's child has far to go,<sup>9</sup> and the Christian atheist is such a child if there ever was one. Likewise, Christian atheism does constitute a real and specific path upon which he treads but one of which much remains to be explored before he will know if it leads to the cosmic center where all patterns are revealed.

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9. Hamilton, "Thursday's Child," op. cit.

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(Geoffrey Cumberlege)